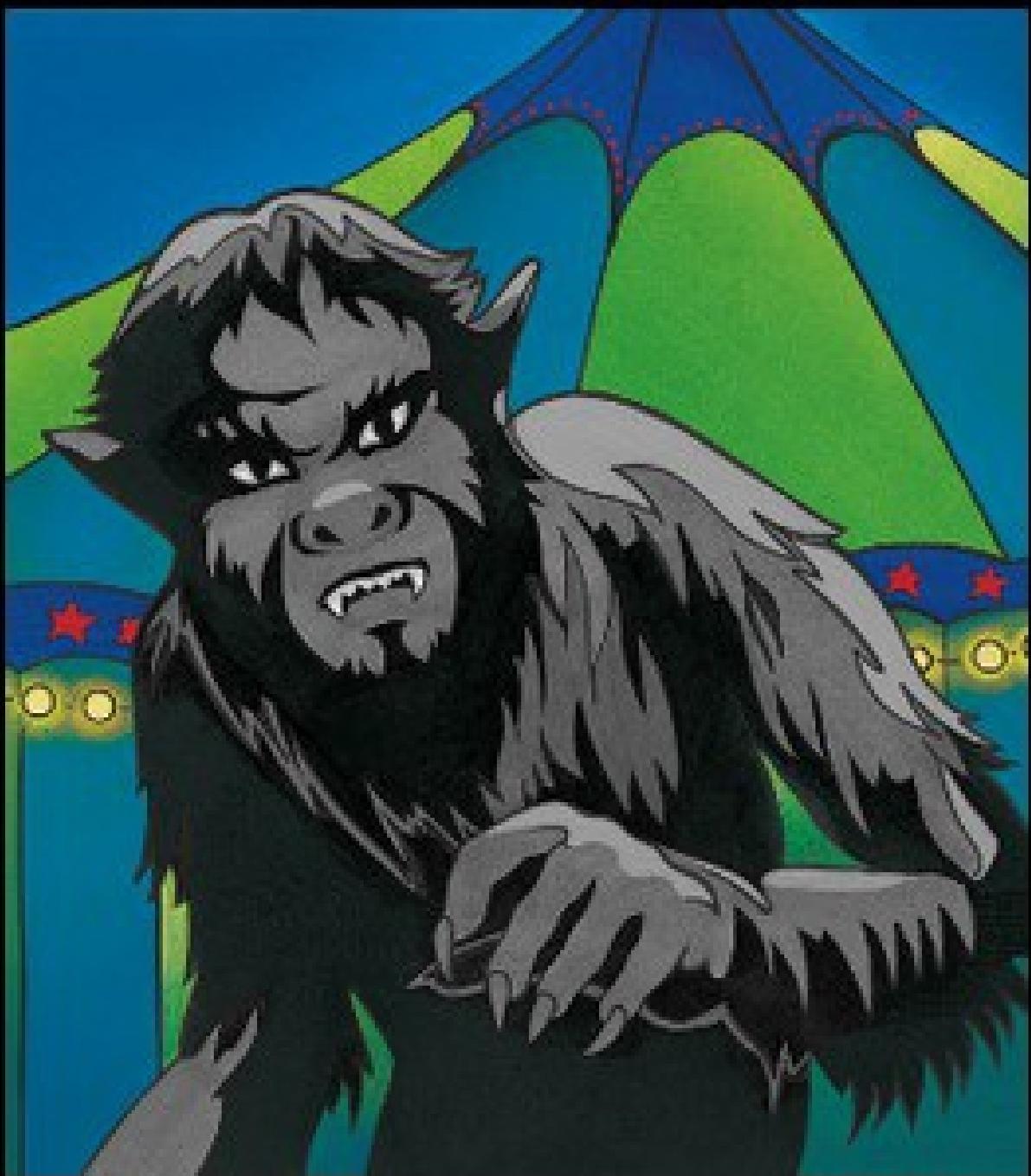


THE
INVESTIGATORS
in

THE SECRET OF THE
BLACK MONSTER





in

**THE SECRET
OF THE
BLACK MONSTER**

Trinket Circus is performing in Rocky Beach with an incredible attraction—a terrible primeval monster captured from the forests of Alaska. Then something goes wrong during their first show. Later, a newspaper article reporting that the monster has escaped puts the whole of Rocky Beach in fear. The Three Investigators pick up the trail. Soon, they come face-to-face with the monster. Suddenly, the hunters become the hunted.

The Three Investigators
in
The Secret of the Black Monster

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*Based on characters created by
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(The Three ???: The Black Monster)

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1. Attack in the Dark

Pete Crenshaw was late. He had promised to be at the salvage yard at 5:30 pm. But at home, the phone had been ringing incessantly. His grandparents had come to visit and Pete had to fulfil his family duties. It had not been easy to convince his mother that he absolutely had to meet Bob and Jupiter. She had not been enthusiastic. After all, he had been hanging around the salvage yard almost every day and as if he couldn't at least make an exception today.

"It sounded incredibly urgent," Pete had replied. "Maybe they have a surprise for me!"

Now it was shortly after six and he was no longer convinced that it was really a surprise. Probably Jupiter would yap at him, why he was late. The First Investigator hated tardiness.

Pete parked his bike and walked towards Headquarters, an old mobile home trailer, which he used with his friends as an office of their detective agency. The padlock was hanging open on the latch, so someone was inside. Pete opened the creaking door, but to his surprise everything in the trailer was dark.

Nobody was here. That's strange. Usually Jupiter never forgot to lock the door when he left the trailer. Or had he perhaps taken Tunnel Two, their secret exit under the hidden floor hatch? No, they almost never used the tunnel now. Maybe they were in the laboratory in the back of the trailer! Pete squeezed his way through between the desk, the filing cabinet and the chairs to the door.

Just as he was about to open it, he remembered Bob's repeated warnings—never enter the lab without knocking. Bob often used the small room as a darkroom for developing photos and it had happened several times that the prints had been destroyed by light coming in.

Pete knocked. "Hello? Are you in there?"

No one answered. But hadn't there been a low rumbling noise?

"Hello?"

No answer again. Pete became queasy. The door had not been locked, yet the trailer was deserted. And there was a rumbling noise in the lab.

Could it be a burglar?

"I'm coming in now!" cried Pete, grabbed the knob with a beating heart and opened the door.

A narrow strip of light fell into the lab, otherwise it was dark. No one seemed to be here as well. The Second Investigator fumbled for the light switch.

Suddenly someone grabbed his wrist and bent his arm behind his back! The door fell shut and the room sank into darkness. Pete gasped in shock, but before he could react, he felt something metallic cold around his wrist—handcuffs!

His other arm was also held tight, but Pete broke free and flailed around indiscriminately. He hit something soft.

Somebody moaned. Desperately Pete looked for the light switch, but when his free hand touched the wall, it was grabbed again and turned on its back with an iron grip.

He was dealing with two gangsters! Pete fought back with all his might, but then the handcuffs snapped shut and he could not move. Now he screamed. Bob and Jupiter must be somewhere in the salvage yard and hear him!

"Shut up!" growled a hoarse voice. "One more sound and you'll regret it!"

"Who are you? Let me go!"

"Not until you get what you deserve," the voice replied threateningly.

The Second Investigator felt a cloth being tied over his eyes. Then he heard the click of the light switch, but the cloth only let a little brightness shimmer through, he couldn't really see anything.

"What do you want from me?" Pete asked. His voice trembled.

"You know very well," claimed the second man with a croaking voice.

"I don't know what you're talking about!" cried Pete and decided that he didn't feel like talking to his tormentors any more. Instead he took a deep breath and shouted with all his might: "Aaaahhhhh!"

"Shut him up!"

Pete was shoved something soft in his mouth. A gag? No. Oddly enough, it melted in his mouth and tasted—sweet. The Second Investigator began to chew to free his mouth. "This is—"

"Cake!" shouted the voice. Suddenly the voice sounded much younger. "Happy birthday, Pete!"

"What? Jupe? Is that you?"

“Bingo!” called the First Investigator and sang a crooked-sounding birthday song joined by Bob was no less crooked.

Pete endured the serenity before he shouted: “Have you gone crazy, scaring me like that?”

“It’s your birthday,” replied Jupiter unmoved. “You have to expect surprises.”

“Surprises?” Pete said. “I thought that I was going to be kidnapped. That’s not funny, Jupe!”

“Give him some more birthday cake, Bob.” Again, the soft, sticky substance filled Pete’s mouth. The cake tasted good, he had to admit that. “Now get these handcuffs and blindfolds off me, you idiots!”

“No,” Bob replied.

“No? What do you mean, no?”

“The surprise has just begun,” Bob quipped. “We still have a lot of work to do.”

“That’s very kind of you, but what good is it if I can’t see?”

“That’s the joke of the matter,” Bob claimed, grabbed Pete by the shoulders and turned him around. “Forward, prisoner!”

Instinctively Pete wanted to lift his arms, but nobody made any effort to free him from the handcuffs. He had to trust that Bob wouldn’t let him run into the nearest wall. Carefully he groped his feet through and out of the trailer, but he did not relax until he had left the short stairs behind him and felt the evening breeze under the open sky. “And now what?”

“Is there any more cake?” Jupiter asked. “Then at least you won’t ask so much. Open your mouth.”

As much as Pete appreciated being fed with cake, he would have preferred to see something. What were those two up to with him? Didn’t he deserve a little more respect as a birthday boy? He could hear footsteps moving away. Then the engine of Bob’s old Beetle started—the sound was unmistakable. The car drove up to them and a door was opened.

“Enter, sir!” Jupe said. “We’re taking you to your real birthday surprise.”

Pete felt for the door of the Beetle with his foot and climbed in carefully. Jupiter held his head so that he wouldn’t hit himself.

“We’ve done everything we can to make sure you enjoy your ride,” Bob continued in a nasally voice. “Just sit back and leave the rest to us!”

Suddenly Pete was put on headphones. Some half-forgotten pop star sang *Happy Birthday* into his ear from a Walkman. Wonderful. Now he

couldn't even hear anything. He was sure Bob and Jupe were now making their stupid jokes about him, sitting blind and deaf in the passenger seat and having no idea what to expect. Well, they should. He had no choice anyway. But woe betide if he did not like their surprise!

After about five minutes, the journey ended. Pete felt that the engine was turned off. Then Jupiter briefly lifted the headphones and said: "Everybody out!"

The headphones were put back on Pete for another round of birthday songs. He laboriously pushed himself out of the car and was guided by Bob and Jupiter by the arm. He tried to concentrate on his remaining senses. He was outside in the sun. Under his feet was gravel. Was he back at the salvage yard?

Had Bob taken a lap around Rocky Beach to confuse him? He took a deep breath through his nose once. There was a pleasantly sweet smell in the air. No, this wasn't the salvage yard—unless Aunt Mathilda had just baked cakes and cookies, roasted almonds and put a huge bucket of ice cream outside.

Suddenly Pete bumped into a metal step. A short staircase led up, then he had to push himself laboriously through a narrow passage. Where was he?

Someone grabbed his shoulders and pressed him down with gentle force. Pete plumped into a comfortable cushion, but he could not stretch his legs. Instead, something suddenly pressed on his stomach so that he could hardly move.

"Hey! That's uncomfortable," he complained loudly, hoping that someone heard him. Because nobody touched him anymore, it was just as well that he was sitting somewhere all alone.

"Bob? Jupe? Are you still there?"

Another birthday greeting over the headphones was the only answer.

Suddenly the armchair on which he was sitting moved. It vibrated and shook like a bus on a bad road. Then it tilted backwards so that Pete was pressed into the backrest. Immediately he thought of a dentist's chair and he was immediately unwell. It rattled on and the wind seemed to get fresher. Pete laughed nervously. "Hey, guys! What's happening here? What are you gonna do to me?"

At first there was no answer, but then suddenly his blindfold and headphones were torn off from behind him. The light was brighter than he

had expected because he was looking directly into the sky. Then he lowered his head and recognized where he was...

... At a dizzying height directly in front of an abyss!

2. Dark Prophecies

“Surprise!” cried Bob and Jupiter laughing behind him in the roller coaster car, which was just climbing the last few metres up the launch summit.

“You idiots!” cried Pete, half laughing, half outraged. “I can’t hold on! Take off my handcuffs now!”

“Too late!” Bob shouted. “You won’t fall out!”

Pete turned around. For a second, he had a wonderful view over Rocky Beach and the Pacific Ocean glistening in the sun on the horizon. Then the car raced into the depths.

Pete screamed as the car went into the first curve and stood almost level. In panic, he pressed himself into the backrest. The car straightened up again, hopped over several hills where Pete’s stomach rebelled and finally shot down a second time, only to shoot up a mountain again immediately afterwards. A sharp left turn, a sharp right turn, where Pete had the feeling that he would fall out at any moment, but then it went back into the horizontal. He was flung back and forth, raced through a short tunnel and ducked under metal struts that shot at him. It was a horrible nightmare and incredible fun at the same time. Then, after half an eternity, which was nevertheless much too short, the car slowed down and Pete breathed again. The safety bar in front of his stomach lifted and Bob and Jupiter helped him out of the car.

“You’re crazy,” Pete gasped. “Can you finally free me from my shackles?”

“What? Already?” Bob asked. “I thought we’d go a few more laps.”

“Absolutely not!” Pete shouted.

“What do you think, Jupe? Do we put him out of his misery?” Bob asked.

The First Investigator nodded benevolently and pulled the key out of his pocket. “It’s his birthday today.”

When Pete could finally move again, he rubbed his slightly aching wrists and looked partly amused, partly embarrassed between his friends.

“A stupid birthday surprise,” he remarked. “But also kind of great. Thanks.”

“You’re welcome,” nodded Jupiter. In a flash Pete pulled his hands away.

“No more blindfold and hands tied behind your back!” Jupiter said. “But that’s not all... Don’t worry. The rest of the programme is quite normal. And free!” Jupiter spread his arms in a grand gesture that encompassed the entire arena. Only now Pete got to look around.

They were on Coffman’s Meadow, a large, vacant lot on the edge of Rocky Beach, which belonged to the candy factory owner Coffman. The area had been used for concerts, flea markets and city festivals for years. Or, as in this case, when the circus came to Rocky Beach.

Nearby there was a small tent with a colourful banner with the inscription ‘Trinket Circus’ in front of its entrance. Behind it, the caravans of the performers were parked. The typical circus smell of wild animals and cotton candy wafted over to them. In front of the tent, there was a lottery stand and a shooting gallery as well as a candy seller.

“Since when is the circus here? I didn’t even realize it was coming to Rocky Beach.”

“The opening night is tonight.” Jupiter looked at his watch. “To be precise, in one hour. And I have free tickets for the three of us!”

“Really?” cried Pete. “Great! Where did you get it?”

“From Uncle Titus,” Jupiter said. “Believe it or not, but the circus director, Mr Copper, is an old colleague of my uncle. They both used to work in the same circus. You know, Uncle Titus used to work in a circus, but that was a few decades ago. He was thrilled when he found out Copper’s circus was coming to Rocky Beach. It’s their first time here. They hadn’t seen each other for ages and spent an entire evening chatting about old times. And on that occasion, he gave me a small stack of free tickets—for the roller coaster, for the shooting gallery and for tonight’s show. He also promised to show us around the circus. We can watch the artists rehearse, the trainers work with the animals and so on.”

“Then Jupe told him it was your birthday,” Bob told him. “And you know what he said? You get a free—”

“Ah! Mr Jones Junior!” suddenly a voice cried out. They turned around. A fat, moustached man with jet-black hair, dressed in a black tails, came towards them. He looked almost like a twin brother of Uncle Titus, only that he was about twice as wide.

“Hello, Mr Copper!” Jupiter cried.

"I'm glad you came! So these are your friends? The famous Three Investigators that your uncle told me about. Let me guess, you're the birthday boy! ... Allow me, Alois Copper." He reached out to Pete and almost crushed him.

"Pete Crenshaw. A fine circus you have here, Mr Copper."

"Oh, you haven't experienced anything yet! Wait until the performance! Wait till you see the wrenching skills of the lovely Miss Lilly... Or Carter with his gorilla... Or Pico the clown... Or our star attraction, Dunnerak the monster from the far north!"

"Monster?" Bob repeated.

"A terrible primeval creature that lived in the forests of Alaska for years until I caught it myself. It is a zoological marvel—the only known and probably the last surviving specimen of its kind. A creature from times long past!"

"I saw the posters," Bob remembered. "This... monster really exists?"

"But of course it exists! You'll see! That reminds me... Have you told your friend Pete about my birthday present yet?"

"I was just about to," Jupiter said.

"What is it?" Pete asked curiously.

Alois Copper conspiratorially bent over. "A look into the future! Madame Yasemin, the famous fortune-teller from the Middle-East, will read your palm! Come along!"

He went to a small black tent nearby, whose cloth panels had 'Madame Yasemin' written on them in squiggly gold letters. At the top of the tent a crescent moon shone in the setting sun. Mr Copper called out something, then peeped into the tent through a crack.

"Madame Yasemin? I have a client for you. The boy who has a birthday today, you know. The bill's on the house." He took a step back and opened the curtain with a theatrical gesture. "Step inside and let Madame Yasemin tell you what the future holds for you, what surprises fate has in store for you!" He raised his index finger. "But be warned! Not every glimpse into the future reveals good things!"

Pete, half amused, half excited, took a step closer and took a look inside the tent. A woman in colourful clothes and with flowing, pitch-black hair sat on a chair and looked at him expectantly.

"Come in!" she asked him in an unusually deep, whispering voice. Jupiter and Bob also wanted to join in, but Madame Yasemin raised her

hand. "Fate does not let itself be seen over the shoulder! You must wait outside!"

"All right, Pete, in the meantime, we'll look around a little. How about you get your next lottery numbers predicted?" Bob winked at the Second Investigator, then strolled off with Jupiter.

When Pete entered the tent, the curtain fell back and blocked out the sunlight. Now only a few small candles illuminated the inside.

"Sit down!" Madame Yasemin said and pointed to the chair opposite her. Between them was a small table on which incense sticks were smoking and emitting a peculiar scent. Next to it lay a pile of tarot cards and a glass ball shimmered on a cloth made of black velvet.

The fortune-teller watched Pete carefully while he looked around. The look in her darkly painted eyes was penetrating and uncomfortable.

"Why... why are you looking at me like that?" Pete asked.

"I'll figure out which door to open for you."

"Door? What do you mean 'door'?"

"The door to your destiny. For some, it opens when I lay the cards on them. For others, I have to ask the crystal ball. But I think..." She tapped her lips with her long, red fingernails. "Yes, I think I will read your palm."

Reluctantly, Pete handed it to her.

Madame Yasemin traced the lines in Pete's palm with her fingers and looked at them closely. For a long time, she said nothing, only now and then she nodded slightly as if to confirm what she had already thought anyway. Then she frowned worriedly.

"So?" asked Pete nervously. "What do you see?"

"You are a cautious person," she replied slowly, without turning her gaze away from his hand. "That's good. Your life line is very long. You will grow very old. I suppose you live healthily. Keep that up and your body will be able to fight off any illness."

"That's comforting," Pete remarked.

"There are some people who are very important to you. But watch out! Even though they value you very much, they often try to keep you from your safe path. They make you live a dangerous life. If you're not careful, this could be your downfall one day."

Pete swallowed. "Indeed?"

A worried expression lay on the face of the fortune-teller. "There is something else."

"What?"

She tapped on a line that ran in a restless zigzag across the palm of his hand. “The line of fate.”

Pete swallowed uneasily. “What about it?”

“I see a dark shadow in the immediate future. A danger that lurks upon you.”

“What kind of danger?”

“I can’t say for sure. But something evil is waiting for you. A sinister presence.” She looked him straight in the eye and lowered her voice: “Beware of the dark!”

3. In the Realm of the Wild Beasts

“What... what can I do about it?” Pete asked insecurely. “Isn’t there something I can do to protect myself?”

Yasemin nodded. “A protection spell might help.”

“You do magic as well?” Pete wondered.

“There’s a little magic in all of us,” she claimed. “But very few people know how to use them.”

She reached for a small, decorated wooden box, opened it and pulled out a transparent, sparkling stone on a silver chain. “This is a crystal covered with a protective spell. If you wear it, it will protect you from all evil—as long as you do not disregard my warnings and always look out for yourself.”

Pete wanted to take the crystal in his hand, but the fortune-teller pulled it away. “Sourcing and preparing an appropriate crystal is a laborious task. I can’t just give it to you.”

“Will you sell it to me?” Pete asked.

“Just a small expense allowance. Let’s say ten dollars.”

“Ten dollars?” At one point, Pete became sceptical. He was fascinated by what Madame Yasemin had told him, but now it sounded too much like cheap business. On the other hand... she had indeed frightened him. At least the warning about his friends wasn’t entirely unjustified. And if there really was some dark danger waiting for him... “Say eight dollars.”

“All right.”

With the crystal around his neck he left the tent of the fortune-teller. Meanwhile, the sun was setting. Little by little, more and more people gathered at the circus grounds, who wanted to ride the roller coaster again or try their luck at the lottery booth until the beginning of the performance. But there was no trace of Jupiter and Bob.

What had Jupiter said? They were allowed to look around behind the scenes before the performance. Then the two of them must have been somewhere at the back of Coffman’s Meadow near the performer’s caravans.

Pete walked past a tall, colourfully dressed juggler who was already showing off some of his skills to an astonished group of people at the ticket booth. But as soon as the Second Investigator had passed the passage to the circus tent, the man called him back. "Hey, boy! You can't go in there!"

"I am looking for my friends, Bob and Jupiter. They—"

"Ah, it's you," the artist interrupted him sullenly. "Your two friends are in the animal tent. Mr Copper said you could go through. But you better not touch anything."

"Thank you." Pete threw an unkind look at him and then circled the circus tent. Behind it was a smaller one. The smell was unmistakable—this had to be where the animals were housed.

He stepped through the entrance. It was almost pitch dark inside. He saw only shadowy outlines—boxes and curtains, a cage, poles and two horses standing quietly in their boxes. Eerie noises were coming at him from everywhere—snorting and grunting, the soft clatter of the cage bars and the scraping of hooves.

Slowly and carefully, so as not to step on a tiger's tail by mistake, Pete walked through the centre aisle. Hopefully he didn't come too close to a frightened horse. He remembered Madame Yasemin's words: 'Beware of the dark!' Involuntarily he reached for the crystal.

At that moment, there was a deafening crash, something roared and out of the darkness, a hairy claw reached for him!

Bob and Jupiter had followed Mr Copper's recommendation to have a look at the animal tent. He had wanted to show them around, but then he had been called away by one of his employees. However, the two detectives had only crossed the tent quickly once. It was so dark in there that they had been glad to find the exit on the other side.

Now they were wandering aimlessly between the wagons, waiting for Alois Copper to return and show them the rest of the circus.

"I wonder what that fortune-teller will tell poor Pete," Jupe said.

"Why poor Pete?" Bob asked.

Jupiter smiled. "You know how Pete reacts to such things. When she foretells him impending doom, he is useless for the rest of the evening. He's quite vulnerable to supernatural things. As far as I am concerned, cards and crystal balls are just to take money out of people's pockets."

"Still, I'd like to get my cards dealt," Bob said. "Just for fun," he quickly added when he noticed Jupiter's sceptical look. "To try it out. It can't hurt, I mean—"

Suddenly, they were interrupted by a loud bang. Bob and Jupiter turned their heads. Mr Copper and another man had stepped out of one of the caravans. One of them had angrily slammed the door shut. Now they were standing there wildly gesticulating, shouting at each other. The two detectives retreated involuntarily to the corner of another caravan. Now they could no longer see them, but the conversation between the circus director and his employee was so loud that they heard every word.

"I don't know what is there to discuss," shouted Mr Copper. "Fix the problem!"

"It cannot be done so fast! We just started the construction today. I told you right away that there is too little time. It's pure madness to go to the first performance on construction day. We have to skip most of the security checks."

"Please, Carter! We've all been doing this for years! I guarantee you that none of the benches will collapse and the tent will stay standing! We don't need security checks."

"But we've had trouble with the power supply ever since lightning struck last summer."

"We just can't afford a new generator!" Mr Copper said. "Neither is the loss of income for an entire evening! The circus simply can no longer afford the luxury of wasting a day just to set up. Otherwise, we can close down in six months at the latest."

The director had spoken the last sentence very softly. Then his voice became firm again: "The show starts in half an hour, that's how long you have to fix the problems and prepare Hannibal for his performance!" They then heard him walk away.

Bob and Jupiter gave each other very telling looks. "The circus seems to be in trouble," Bob whispered.

But before Jupiter could answer, a loud crash echoed across the arena. Someone screamed.

"That was Pete!" Bob gasped. "It came from the animal tent!"

They ran off, knocked the heavy tarpaulin to the side in front of the entrance and ran inside.

"Pete! Are you here?" Bob shouted.

No answer. Just the growling and scratching of nervous animals in the dark.

“My goodness, you can hardly see your hand in front of your face! Pete?” Bob said again.

“Here... here I am!” Pete gasped.

“Was that you screaming? What happened?” Bob asked.

“Nothing at all.” He came at them from the other side of the tent. “Just an ape. But I was scared to death. And the other critters too, I suppose.”

“An ape?” Jupe asked.

“Yes. I was walking past his cage and suddenly he jumped against the bars and grabbed me. Luckily he didn’t get me. I wouldn’t have had a chance against him. I think it was a gorilla.”

“That must have been Hannibal, that gorilla of that Carter guy. He definitely just wanted to play,” Jupiter was convinced. “After all, he’s a circus gorilla and probably quite tame.”

“Yes, but he didn’t attack you,” said Pete and threw a worried glance over his shoulder. “It’s spooky here. Why is there no light?”

“Mr Copper just had an argument with someone,” Bob said. “Among other things, it was about the electrical generator. Maybe it’s broken. Say, what’s that thing you’re wearing around your neck?”

“What? Oh, nothing.” Pete wanted to hide the crystal under his shirt, but Jupiter held it back.

“Let me see!” Jupe demanded.

The Second Investigator rolled his eyes. “It’s a crystal that I got from Madame Yasemin.”

“A crystal?” Bob kept himself from laughing. “And what do you want with it? Does it protect you from evil spirits?”

“Sort of.” Now Pete finally got rid of the stone under his shirt.

“What did she say? Will you win the lottery soon?” Bob mocked. “Or meet the great love of your life?”

“She told me not to answer any more questions from nosy friends,” Pete said and quickly changed the subject. “Where is Mr Copper now? Wasn’t he going to show us the circus?”

“He said we could look around by ourselves,” Bob replied. “But he forgot to mention that there’s no light here. We’d better go back.”

They had almost reached the exit when Jupiter stopped abruptly. “Hey, what’s that?” He pointed to a cage that was covered with black cloth. On one of the bars was the poster that had already caught Bob’s eye in town

—‘Dunnerak, the Monster’. The poster showed a gloomy creature with small, flashing eyes in the middle of a shaggy fur face staring at the viewer.

Then they heard a growl! Frightened, they retreated.

“It... it’s in there,” Pete whispered. “The monster from the far north!”

“Seems so,” whispered Jupiter and stepped forward again. Slowly his hand approached the cloth covering the cage.

“Are you crazy?” hissed Pete. “You don’t want to look in there!”

“Why not?” Jupe said. “We’re going to see it anyway!”

“But... but what if the beast is dangerous?” As if to confirm, another deep growl came from the cage. It sounded stranger and more threatening than anything Pete had ever heard before. A shiver ran down his spine.

“Come on, let’s get out of here!” Pete urged.

“Hold on for a while.” Jupiter stopped him. “I just want to quickly see if there’s really a monster in there.” Regardless of the scratching and growling behind the black cloth, he reached for it.

Suddenly a hand shot out of nowhere and grabbed Jupiter!

4. Dunnerak

Jupiter turned around. A dark shadow had appeared behind them and held his wrist.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you.”

“Mr Copper! Oh, you scared me. I didn’t hear you come.” Jupiter gasped.

The circus director released Jupiter from his iron grip.

“Just be careful! This monster is not to be trifled with! When it’s in a bad mood, it becomes a raging beast. Better stay away from that cage.”

“We just wanted to have a look inside,” Jupiter said apologetically.

“That’s all right, boys, but it’s really too dangerous. You’ll see the monster in the performance. You can go into the tent and look for the best seats, because the first spectators are already going in. I have a lot of work to do now.” An angry snort came out of the cage. “Calm the monster down, for example.” Although the last sentence sounded like a joke, the director didn’t bat an eyelid.

Uncertain, The Three Investigators left the tent and strolled across the arena back to the main entrance. “Is he really serious about the monster?” Bob finally asked. “I mean, there isn’t a real monster in there, is there? There’s no such thing.”

“And then what growled like that when Jupe went closer?” Pete wanted to know. “I’m sorry, guys, but it sounded a lot like a monster to me.”

“We shall see,” said Jupiter. “I, for one, would like to distinguish a real monster from a fake one. Come, let’s follow Mr Copper’s advice and find good seats for the show!”

The evening performance was not as well attended as The Three Investigators had expected. Since the circus tent was not very big, they had expected a sold-out performance, but many seats remained empty.

“It’s not really that busy,” Bob remarked. “Mr Copper won’t be pleased.”

“But at least there are some celebrities.” Pete pointed to a couple in fancy dress sitting three rows in front of them. “That’s the mayor and his

wife, isn't it?"

Bob nodded. "They always get personal invitations when there's something special going on in Rocky Beach."

"My goodness, she's covered herself in bling again today," the Second Investigator noted. "Does she think the brilliance of the diamonds on her body outshines her wrinkles?"

"Shhh!" hissed Jupiter. "She is sitting only five metres away! I think she can hear you."

"Oh, nonsense," Pete remarked.

Their conversation was abruptly ended when the music came on. The Three Investigators looked around, but there was no band—the music came from a recording. Then the show began. With marching music, a clown and a young dancer came in, juggling and throwing confetti into the crowd. Mr Copper strutted into the ring with his entourage. He wore a top hat and spread his arms.

"Ladies and gentlemen! Welcome to Trinket Circus—a world of excitement and magic! Witness the breathtaking acrobatics, fascinating magic and perfect animal acts! I guarantee you, you will not regret coming here tonight!"

Alois Copper walked round after round through the ring and promised the spectators even more miracles. Then the show started with a juggling act, which was good but not breathtaking. Afterwards Madame Yasemin appeared on the stage and performed some good magic tricks. Miss Lilly showed the art of body bending by clamping her head between her feet—from behind. Then there was a clown and finally Carter with his gorilla Hannibal, who joked with the spectators and got Hannibal to shake hands with the mayor's wife.

The Three Investigators liked the show, but it didn't live up to Copper's promises—it was typical circus standard that they had all seen dozens of times before elsewhere. But maybe that would change, because the highlight of the evening was still to come.

"Ladies and gentlemen," cried Copper, as the trained horses and goats had just left the ring. "I present to you something I'm sure you've never seen before. A being from prehistoric times who mysteriously survived to this day.

"For centuries, the indigenous people of Alaska have told eerie stories about a creature that roams the vast, dark and lonely forests. Hunters found footprints of the monster, but never got to see it. In particularly cold

winters, when there was no food, hunger drove it out of the forests and into the villages, where it tore the cattle apart, leaving a bloody trail of death. Many intrepid adventurers tried to catch it—but lost their lives in the process.

“The natives has a legend about this monster. According to the legend, after having created so many peaceful and harmless animals, the gods had to restore the balance of power. And so they created a beast that was more dangerous and devious than anything that had ever walked the earth before. They called it Dunnerak, which means demon. And from that time on, Dunnerak roamed the wilderness of Alaska, spreading fear and terror.”

“He makes it so exciting,” whispered Jupiter. But Bob and Pete didn’t even pay attention to him. The circus director’s uncanny story had its effect—a pleasant horror had gripped them. They finally wanted to see the monster!

“My grandfather told me about Dunnerak,” Copper continued. “And even as a little boy, I decided that one day I would track down and catch the monster so that it could never do any harm again. After learning all about hunting and trapping, I finally moved to the Alaskan forests as a grown man.

“For days, I was on the road without finding even a trace of Dunnerak. Was the creature supposed to be a fairy tale after all? But then I discovered a dead bear. It was horribly mauled, the rest of its flesh hanging in tatters that the carrion birds tore from its bones. No other predator could have done such a thing. I knew I was close to Dunnerak.”

While Alois Copper was telling his story, he walked steadily in circles. Little by little, he had lowered his voice and just as imperceptibly, the light had been dimmed. In the circus tent, it was as quiet as a mouse.

“Then one night, I heard it very close to my tent. It roared and raged and scared me so much that I didn’t dare go outside. The next morning, I saw that it had destroyed all my equipment. I could not get anyone else to help me. Now I was on my own and I only had my stun gun. All day long, I followed its tracks through the forest, sometimes I heard it breaking through the undergrowth in the far distance, but it seemed to sense me coming and flee.

“Then, one night, when my camp-fire had just gone out, it came. It knew that I could not see it, and it rushed straight towards me. I grabbed my rifle and shot into the darkness on the off chance. I hit it... Otherwise I wouldn’t be here now...

“But Dunnerak didn’t fall down immediately as I had expected, it just staggered, but stayed on his feet. The stun charge I had given it would have cut down an ox on the spot, but the creature remained conscious and attacked me. It slammed its razor-sharp claws into my arm before I could pull the trigger a second time. Then it let go of me. Only the third shot stunned it finally.”

Now he rolled up his sleeve and showed a long, ugly scar running across his forearm. A murmur went through the spectators. “This scar reminds me every day of how dangerous the beast is. And now, I will demonstrate.

“We dimmed the lights because Dunnerak is a very photophobic being. Therefore I must warn you—do not take any photos! A photo flash would send it into a frenzy and then I can no longer guarantee your safety... because I’m going to let that monster out of its cage today. I rarely do that because it is still unpredictable. But today, Dunnerak had a quiet day, so I think I can dare to free it from its prison for a few moments.

“Whatever happens, ladies and gentlemen, keep calm and do not frighten it! And please don’t give it any applause. Once the cage is in front of you, I won’t be able to talk to you, as it would irritate Dunnerak. But do not be afraid, nothing will happen to you.”

With these words, the circus director went to the entrance of the ring, which was covered by a curtain. In the meantime, there was only very dim twilight. Slowly he drew the curtain. Two of his helpers—the gorilla tamer Carter and Miss Lilly—rolled in the large cage that The Three Investigators had earlier stood in front of. It was still covered with black cloth. Carter and Lilly hurried to get away when the cage was in the middle of the ring.

There was a breathless silence in the tent, which was suddenly torn apart by a dark growl. It sounded dark and strange, like a mixture of the hissing of a cat of prey, the roar of a bear and the barking of a wolf. The spectators gasped in horror.

Mr Copper peeped through a gap in the cloth, then pulled it aside very slowly and allowed people to look inside the cage.

Pete held his breath. A black, shaggy creature crouched in there, turning its head back and forth in uncertainty. Its eyes glisten like those of a cat.

At first, not much was visible. Then the creature rose and walked slowly bent over in the cage up and down. It was about two metres tall.

The legs looked like a human's, but the arms were much longer. Shaggy, black fur covered its whole body, only the hands, bent into claws, with which it sometimes rested on the floor like an ape, were hairless. The face also had something ape-like about it. Every now and then, it bared its white, pointed teeth.

Copper let the creature run up and down the cage for a while, whispering incomprehensible words. Then he pulled a key from his pocket and opened the huge padlock. He pushed the latch back and pulled open the heavy, squeaky door.

Instantly, Dunnerak made a leap and jumped into the ring, where a few quick steps were taken. The spectators backed into their seats, but Mr Copper made a few reassuring gestures. Everything seemed to be fine. He walked towards the monster and touched it on the arm, whereupon it growled and made a small jump to the side. Only very slowly did the creature calm down. Then the director took it for a walk around the ring. When they came to The Three Investigators, Pete noticed how tiny Mr Copper was compared to the monster. The Second Investigator felt that his T-shirt was soaking wet under his arms.

Suddenly, Copper bent down and pulled out a piece of raw meat from a small box that had been placed at the edge of the ring. Immediately, Dunnerak roared, pulling it from his hand. It sunk its razor-sharp teeth into the meat and tore out a large piece, which it devoured greedily. It became more restless again, prancing back and forth and making small leaps towards the spectators as if it suspected its dessert there. Every now and then, it growled and roared and small screams became loud among the spectators.

All of a sudden, Copper seemed to have lost his cool. A panicky expression lay on his face. He quickly reached back into the box, pulled out another piece of meat and threw it into the cage before Dunnerak could reach for it. The beast immediately ran back, jumped into the cage and pounced on the meat. Copper swung the door shut and pushed the latch forward. Everyone breathed a sigh of relief. The director pulled the black cloth back to cover the cage and clapped his hands once. Carter and Miss Lilly came running up and pushed the cage out.

For a few seconds, there was silence, but when the angry growl of the monster had ceased and the light had brightened again, raging applause broke out. People cheered with enthusiasm and relief. Mr Copper obviously enjoyed the spectacle.

“That was great!” Bob shouted to his friends. “That was great! A real monster!”

Pete remained reserved.

“What’s wrong with you, Pete?” Jupiter asked. “Is the fear still in your bones?”

“Haven’t you noticed?” he asked.

“What?” Jupe asked.

“Mr Copper forgot to put the lock on the latch.”

“Oh, don’t worry! It was all for show. You know how they—” That was as far as Jupiter got.

Suddenly something banged and the lights went out. It was pitch dark. At once, the applause stopped and there was a terrified silence. The curtain rustled. They heard the monster roar. Not somewhere outside in the cage, but here, in the middle of the ring!

5. Panic!

Within seconds, the tent turned into a raging hell. People screamed. Everywhere there was banging and cracking. Again and again, they heard the monster grunt and snort, but it was so dark that nobody could tell where the monster was. Finally, the noise was so great that Dunnerak's growl was completely lost in it.

"Keep calm!" cried Mr Copper in the midst of the chaos. "Everything is under control! Only the lights are out!" No one paid any attention to him.

The Three Investigators sat on their bench as if paralyzed, while panic broke out around them. Something touched Bob's arm. He screamed and jumped up, tripped over Pete's legs and hit the floor hard.

"Bob!" cried the Second Investigator. "Bob, what's wrong? What is _____?"

At that moment, the lights turned on again. The Three Investigators looked up. Everywhere, there were spectators trying to leave the circus tent and many had fallen down. Fear was written all over their faces. There was no trace of Dunnerak. The people slowly calmed down and looked around in confusion.

Mr Copper strode through the ring in shock and raised his arms. "Please, please, calm down! Nothing has happened! Absolutely nothing! We just had a blackout, that's all!"

"But the monster—" someone shouted.

"Is in the cage and can do no harm to anyone!" Mr Copper shouted back. "I am truly sorry to have frightened you, but I assure you that there was never any serious danger! Please, return to your seats."

Little by little, the situation returned to normal. Here and there, a nervous laughter could be heard, but it sounded rather relieved than worried.

"But Dunnerak was here in the tent when it was dark!" Pete whispered. "We all heard that!"

Jupiter raised his hand. "Just be quiet, Pete, or you'll start another panic! We'll talk about this later, all right? Right now, I want to see how

Mr Copper can calm the spectators.”

Suddenly, a woman screamed. “My jewels! My jewels are gone! Someone ripped the chain off my neck!”

The Three Investigators turned their heads. “That’s the mayor’s wife!” hissed Bob and pointed to the lady who had jumped up and looked down accusingly at Mr Copper.

Immediately, the spectators checked their bags and touched their rings and bracelets. Outraged, voices became loud.

Mr Copper tried to address the situation. “Please take your seats, ladies! Everything will clear up if you just stay calm! I assure you that the blackout was just a minor glitch.”

But some people had already got up from their seats and were heading for the exit.

“Someone has taken advantage of the darkness to steal from a spectator,” Bob said. “And now the thief can disappear without attracting attention. Look, more and more people are leaving the tent!”

“We must do something,” Pete said.

“What? You wanna stand by the exit and frisk everyone who comes out?” Bob questioned. “It’s impossible.”

Bob was right. By this time, just over half the people had got up and were moving towards the exit. Mr Copper desperately tried to stop them, but the fear and outrage numbed people to any discussion. In addition, the mayor and his wife had in the meantime entered the ring and spoke fiercely, gesticulating to the director.

“Oh, dear,” muttered Pete. “He’s in real trouble.”

Jupiter got up, too.

“What? Are you leaving too?” Pete asked.

“Yes. But in the other direction.” Jupe pushed his way along the bench to the stairs. Pete and Bob followed him.

“What are you up to?” Pete asked.

“I want to see if the monster is actually in its cage.”

They joined the crowd that was streaming down the grandstand stairs to the exit. When they reached the bottom, however, they turned the other way, towards the stage curtain, behind which the cage with the monster had disappeared. The other performers had come out in the meantime and tried in vain to prevent the people from leaving. Mr Copper spoke calmly to the mayor and his wife. No one paid any attention to The Three Investigators. They managed to disappear behind the curtain unseen.

There was only a dimly-shining light bulb. The stage entrance was small and deserted and apparently only served as an extended rear exit. They didn't see any cage there—and fortunately no monster either, as Pete noted with relief.

"They must have taken it right back to the animal tent," whispered Jupiter and waved his friends to follow him.

Outside, it had become quite dark in the meantime. Coffman's Meadow was illuminated only by the colourful lights of the roller coaster, in whose glow of which the spectators left the place. But back here, at the back of the circus tent, there was no one.

The Three Investigators sneaked over to the flat, long tent and listened at the tarpaulin. Only the familiar snorting and grunting of the animals could be heard, nothing else.

Jupiter parted the fabric that blocked the entrance by a hand's breadth and peered through. A tall man stood in front of Dunnerak's cage in the light of a small oil lamp. The light was so faint that the First Investigator could not see who it was or what he was doing exactly.

"What is it?" asked Pete. "Why don't you go inside?"

"Shhh!" Jupiter whispered.

But it was already too late. The figure had heard him and turned around. "Hey! Who's there?"

Jupiter sighed and pushed himself through the entrance into the tent.

"Jupiter Jones and—"

"Oh, it's you again!" the man replied irritably, retreated from the cage and came towards him. Now Jupiter recognized him.

It was Pico, the juggler and clown. "What are you doing here?" he asked.

"We... just wanted to see if there was anything wrong with the animals," Bob lied.

"That's what I had in mind. They got scared when the lights went out and suddenly everybody was screaming. But I managed to calm them down."

"Is Dunnerak all right?" Pete asked reluctantly.

"Everything's fine," replied Pico, and took a look at the cage, which was still covered with a black cloth. As if to confirm, the monster growled.

"But we shouldn't bother it now. Go home, boys, there's nothing more to see here." He pushed them out of the tent and walked them towards the roller coaster. They found themselves among the other spectators who

were holding indignant discussions about the incident on Coffman's Meadow. They had no chance of going back unseen, because Pico had stopped and stood guard at the only access to the back of the arena.

"Highly interesting," Jupiter mumbled and pinched his lower lip. He always did that when he was thinking.

"What?" Pete asked.

The First Investigator nodded imperceptibly in the direction of the ticket booth. "Pico won't let us out of his sight. As if he was afraid we'd go back and check out the tent unobserved."

"What do you mean?" Pete asked.

"Something funny! Pico tampered with Dunnerak's cage when I peeked into the tent. I couldn't see exactly what he was doing, but he obviously felt caught up in something when he spotted us."

"So you don't believe him, that he was just checking up on Dunnerak?" Pete followed up.

"Yes, he did. But maybe he took the opportunity to take the stolen jewellery from it."

"What?" cried Pete, but immediately lowered his voice when some people turned around after him. "So you also believe the monster stole the jewels? The thought occurred to me immediately! I just did not dare to say it. I thought you'd say I was crazy."

The First Investigator, who felt unpleasantly eavesdropped in this crowd, pulled his friends aside a bit and whispered: "It could have been the monster. This is one of many possibilities... Or one of the spectators could be a pickpocket who knew how to take advantage of the moment."

"Of course we won't catch him again," Bob remarked. "But it could have been someone from the circus."

Jupe nodded. "This theory in turn raises the question whether the blackout was actually a coincidence—or a failure deliberately engineered by the perpetrator."

Pete rolled his eyes. Whenever Jupiter's thinking machine was running, he fell into this stilted way of speaking in which hardly anyone understood a word. At least not him. "It sounds like you can't wait to solve this mystery again, Jupe."

The First Investigator grinned broadly. "Exactly, Pete! A blackout in a circus tent, a theft and a monster from Alaska's wilderness. Not only does this sound exciting, but it sounds tremendously like a new case for The Three Investigators!"

“And how do we proceed?” asked Bob, who didn’t have the slightest idea. “The thief could be long gone... and he didn’t leave any marks either.”

Jupiter was just about to answer when the mayor and his wife passed them a few metres away and headed for the street. Although they were talking to each other in a subdued manner, The Three Investigators overheard part of the exchange of words: “You can’t possibly tell the police! They’ll laugh at you—and it wouldn’t help my reputation.”

“I know, but it’s still the truth! I swear to you—when it was dark, something hairy touched me!”

6. Attack in Broad Daylight

When Jupiter told his uncle the story the next morning, his uncle was horrified.

“That’s terrible! Poor Alois! If the press reports it, he’ll be ruined in Rocky Beach! What am I talking about? This town is so small, the newspaper need not even intervene. Probably half of Rocky Beach knows by now what happened at the circus yesterday. Alois really didn’t deserve that.”

“The circus isn’t doing too well, is it?” Jupe asked.

Uncle Titus shook his head. “No circus is doing well anymore. People prefer to go to the movies or sit in front of computers. It seems more exciting than the circus ring... And Trinket Circus is small, has no world-famous stars, and no trapeze artists either. It’s a miracle Alois lasted this long, anyway. Most would have gone bankrupt already.”

“Do you know the other people who work in his circus?”

Uncle Titus shook his head. “Not personally. But I know that Carter, the trainer, has been in the business for decades, going from circus to circus.”

“What about Pico the clown?”

“Never heard of him.”

Jupiter pulled a disappointed face and drank the last sip of cocoa. He looked at his watch. “I have to go.”

“So soon? What are you up to?”

“I’m meeting Pete and Bob at Coffman’s Meadow. We want to see if we can find out anything about the blackout yesterday.”

“You want to play detective again?” Uncle Titus asked half amused, half worried.

“Do you think Mr Copper will take us up on it?” Jupiter asked.

“Try it,” Uncle Titus suggested. “But don’t be surprised if he’s not half as jovial as he was yesterday. He can be a very moody person.”

"I don't have any time for you guys! You better get out of here right now! Or come to the show tonight. That is, if it is not cancelled."

Alois Copper and Carter sat together in the meadow in front of the partially dismantled generator. Their hands were covered with oil. All around them, tools were scattered. Jupiter hadn't said anything more than 'Good morning' when the director bawled at him.

"I'm sorry, sir, we don't want to disturb you. We—"

"Then don't disturb us," growled Mr Copper without turning to them.

The Three Investigators cast baffled glances at each other. Finally, Jupiter gave his friends a nod of his head to retreat. "Uncle Titus was right," said the First Investigator as they were out of earshot. "Copper can be quite moody at times."

"So what now?" Pete asked.

"We'll just interview the other circus people. Maybe they can help us."

At this moment, Madame Yasemin stepped out of one of the caravans and approached them. Only now did The Three Investigators notice that they were standing right in front of her little black tent.

"Customers this early in the morning?" she asked in surprise. "Has your friend convinced you that a little peek into the future can never hurt?"

"We are more interested in a look into the past," replied Jupiter. "To be precise—at what happened yesterday during the performance."

Madame Yasemin lowered her head so that black strands of hair fell on her face and the golden earrings tinkled. "I saw dark shadows coming. Had I known, however, what terrible things were in store for us, I would have warned Mr Copper."

"You mean you knew something was going to happen?" Bob went into it.

She nodded. "Every place has a special aura that can have a positive or negative effect on people. Whenever we move the circus to a new town, I study the astrological charts. And one thing I knew from the beginning was that Rocky Beach will not bring us luck. This town is no good for us."

Jupiter frowned. "So you think the blackout is a stroke of fate you've already seen in the stars?" She nodded. "And the theft of the jewellery?"

"Both were signs that we shouldn't stay here for long. But you don't seem to agree with me."

"Well, I suspect that the blackout was intentional," Jupiter explained. "After all, the lights went out at exactly the time when panic was most

likely—right after Dunnerak's performance. And even though it was only dark for a few seconds, a lady's jewellery was stolen in that short time. A bit much for coincidence, don't you think?"

She examined Jupiter from top to bottom, then looked deep into his eyes. "You are a very suspicious and curious young man. You love mystery... but only as long as you can uncover it. You can't accept things or events that can't be explained logically."

Jupiter took a step back without meaning to. Madame Yasemin's piercing gaze terrified him.

"But believe me," she continued, "sometimes things just happen. There's no reason for it. It's called fate."

As she turned to leave, her gaze caught on Pete. She leaned forward and whispered to him inaudibly for the others: "And you still beware of the darkness. You won't be able to drive away the dark shadows if you hide the crystal under your shirt." Now she finally turned.

The Three Investigators watched her at a loss.

"What was that?" Bob marvelled.

"I don't know," Jupe remarked. "What did she say to you, Pete?"

The Second Investigator, who was just about to pull the crystal out from under the shirt, quickly covered the glittering jewel with his hand. "Oh, nothing... nothing much. She just repeated what she said yesterday. That I shouldn't answer nosey questions."

Bob looked at him sceptically. But suddenly his eyes widened in terror.

"Bob? What's the matter with you?" Pete gasped.

"Behind you, Pete! The monster!" Bob shrieked.

The Second Investigator was driving around. A dark, furry shadow rushed towards him snorting. Pete screamed and stumbled backwards. The creature stared him straight in the eyes and leaped across the meadow on all fours.

Pete was paralyzed. Only a few more metres and it would have jumped at him, tear him to the ground and smash his fangs into his neck!

A whistle blew across the arena and one metre before Pete, the monster stopped. They looked at each other. It was no monster. It was Hannibal!

"Hannibal, you little spearmint, leave these people alone right now!" A young blond girl came running over. It was Miss Lilly, the acrobat who could bend her body in incredible ways.

She ran towards the gorilla, which had stopped but still didn't let Pete out of his sight.

"Don't worry, he won't do anything," she assured him from afar. "He just wants to play!"

"Play?" Pete cried somewhat hysterically and cleared his throat to get his voice back under control. The gorilla snorted and showed his pointed teeth. It was more like he wanted to tear Pete apart... Or laugh at him...

"Yes, he's perfectly safe!" Now she had finally reached the gorilla. She grabbed him by the collar, which was so big that Pete could have easily used it as a belt.

It didn't look as if the delicate girl had the slightest chance of taming the gorilla when it mattered, as the ape was almost five times as wide as her.

But the animal behaved calmly. "Sorry, I didn't know anyone was here, otherwise I wouldn't have released Hannibal."

"So is he dangerous after all?" Pete asked.

She shook her head quickly. "No. But I know that most people are afraid of him. So I only let him out of his cage to play when no one's around."

"How can you be so sure that he won't even have a bad day and accidentally break a few bones," Pete asked with a worried look at Hannibal.

She laughed. "I've known him for a year. He wasn't even full-grown then. We're great friends... Right, Hannibal?" She stroked the gorilla's hairy head. He growled contentedly and looked almost fondly at Lilly. Then she reached out to The Three Investigators.

"I'm Lilly, I'm with the circus."

"Jupiter Jones," said Jupiter and then introduced his friends. "My uncle is a friend of your circus director."

She nodded. "I know. Nice meeting you."

"We saw you at the show yesterday," Bob said. "How do you learn to bend your body like that? Well, standing up, I can barely bend over and get my hands to touch my toes."

"Really?" Jupiter asked. "I can't even do that."

"Standing up, I don't think you could even see your toes," Pete teased and poked his index finger into the bacon rolls of the First Investigator. He slowly felt safer, even though Hannibal hadn't moved an inch back yet.

"It's all about practice," Lilly said. "So you were at the show last night? What..." She swallowed. "What do you say to this? Is this incident the talk of the town already?"

"Not yet, but it may happen as soon as the newspaper comes out tomorrow," Bob replied. He noticed her worried face. "This isn't doing your circus much good, is it?"

She laughed bitterly. "You can say that again. Yesterday after the performance, all hell broke loose. Mr Copper and Carter shouted at each other, accusing each other of being responsible for the blackout. Of course they're both right—and wrong. The generator's been running wild for weeks, but Mr Copper just doesn't have the money to buy a new one. Normally, a blackout like this is nothing to worry about, even during a performance. But yesterday was a very bad time. And then we had a thief among the spectators!"

The Three Investigators looked at each other. Jupiter cleared his throat. "Do you think it's possible that—"

Pete gave him another shot in the ribs, but this time much harder.

"Hey! What—"

"Somebody's listening to us," whispered Pete and looked over at the roller coaster with his head half lowered.

Bob and Jupiter suppressed the impulse to turn around, but Lilly immediately turned her gaze in the appropriate direction. A tall, slender man, half hidden behind a supporting beam, took a step back and disappeared behind the colourfully painted roller coaster.

7. Not a Trace Far and Wide

“Who was that?” whispered Bob.

“That was just Pico,” Lilly calmly said.

“The clown?” And why was he listening to us?” Bob asked.

She beckoned. “Don’t worry about it. Pico can be a little weird sometimes. But he’s a nice guy once you get to know him.”

“Really?” Jupiter remained sceptical. “Well, at any rate, we suspect that it was no accident that the lights went out after Dunnerak’s performance, of all things.”

“What do you mean?”

“We all heard the monster running through the ring,” Pete said. “It was in the tent when it was dark. And outside, we heard the mayor’s wife claim that something hairy touched her. Could it not be that it was the... the monster?”

Lilly stared at him with big eyes, then she laughed, whereupon Hannibal straightened up and started to roam around.

“The monster? You mean Dunnerak? No! That roar you heard during the blackout was some spectators who probably thought it was funny to scare the others. Certainly not Dunnerak.”

“But I distinctly saw Mr Copper forget to lock the cage.”

Lilly shook her head. “The monster still wouldn’t get out of its cage. It’s completely harmless, believe me.”

“But it didn’t seem so harmless during the performance,” Pete said. “When I think of it throwing itself on that hunk of meat and getting all restless...”

“If it was tame, nobody would have been afraid, would they?” Lilly replied, winking conspiratorially.

“So it was just a show,” Jupiter expressed the suspicion he had had all along. “Everything that happened yesterday—until the blackout—was just for show, right?”

“If you won’t tell anyone, yeah. Believe me, Mr Copper and Dunnerak deliver the performance every night of the brave hero and the untamed beast. Otherwise, nobody would be impressed.”

Bob and Pete's mouth remained open. "And we fell for it," Bob admitted. "I was really scared."

"That was the whole idea," Lilly said.

Jupiter remained cool. "Dunnerak is not real, right?"

"What do you think?" Lilly asked.

"It is not a monster from the deep forests of Alaska. There's some kind of trick behind it."

"What makes you think so?" Lilly remarked. "Of course it's real. Just not half as dangerous as everyone thinks."

"Can we see it?" Jupiter asked.

Immediately Lilly shook her head. "No way. It usually sleeps during the day. And if you wake it up, it might actually be in a bad mood and ruin the performance. But tell me, why are you so interested in yesterday's story? Did you come all the way back here just for that?"

The First Investigator nodded. "We have a professional interest in the incident, so to speak. May I give you our card?"

He looked in his trouser pocket, but Bob was quicker and handed Lilly one of their business cards. It said:



"Are you serious?"

"Absolutely," Jupiter said. "We witnessed a crime yesterday and we want to solve it."

"That wouldn't be bad, though," said Lilly sadly. "If you catch the thief, it could restore the reputation of the circus."

"Tell us about the other people in the circus," Bob asked.

"What do you want to know? They're all very nice. We're a real little family. Carter, for instance, joined us a year ago with a young Hannibal."

When the gorilla heard his name, he did an impromptu somersault. Lilly smiled. "Carter runs the roller coaster, is in charge of all the circus

equipment and trains with the gorilla every day. He is a real buddy. But he has eternal trouble with the director. They fight all the time. Although... I think they really like each other. Carter is crazy about the circus and Mr Copper knows it."

"What about that clown Pico?" Pete wanted to know. "You just said he was a little strange."

"Well, he's a loner. Mostly he sits alone in his trailer or studies new acts."

"But it's strange for a clown," the Second Investigator thought.

"Not necessarily. Who says clowns always have to be funny? Pico's all right. He just doesn't like strangers, probably that's why he always wears a mask in front of spectators. The only reason he listened us was probably because he wanted to know what you were doing here on the circus grounds. He probably wouldn't like it at all if he knew you were snooping around."

"We're not snooping," Jupiter defended himself. "We are investigating. What about Madame Yasemin? She's just putting on a show too, right?"

Lilly smiled. "I can imagine it looks like this. But Yasemin is really like that. She fiddles with her tarot cards and her crystal ball all day long. I don't think she's ever made a clear, unambiguous statement. She lives in her own world of mysticism and mystery. But believe it or not, there's actually something to it. Yasemin has special abilities. I'm not saying she can see the future, but... she has premonitions."

"Did she tell you she foresaw nothing good for your Rocky Beach gig?" Bob wanted to know.

Lilly nodded. "She did. But we can't just skip a town on our tour, so we had no choice. We had to pitch our tent here on Coffman's Meadow. But tell me, what do you want to do by asking about my colleagues?"

"Well," Jupiter began cautiously. "It is quite possible that someone from the circus is behind the theft."

"Sorry? Are you crazy? None of us would do such a thing!" Lilly exclaimed.

"How can you be so sure?" Jupiter remarked.

"Well, listen," she replied in indignation. "I've been travelling all over the country with these people for years. No one would deliberately harm the circus! No, absolutely not! Don't even think about it! It was a common pickpocket who robbed the lady yesterday in all that confusion. Anyway,

you better make sure you can prove it instead of suspecting innocent people.”

She looked down at the gorilla, who had meanwhile sat down next to her and looked bored. “I think Hannibal is hungry. I must feed him now. *Ciao.*”

Without another word she took the ape by his hand and marched with him back to the caravans.

“I think you really annoyed her, Jupe,” Pete remarked.

“You’re right, Pete,” hummed Jupiter reluctantly. “I thought she was quite accessible and could be a help to us. But apparently she’s convinced of the innocence of her people.”

Bob scratched his chin. “What if she’s right and one of the spectators was indeed the thief? Then we’re in trouble.”

“There’s only one thing. We’re going back to the show tonight. Then we’ll see if anything happens again. But this time we’re not gonna let the perpetrator get away.”

That evening’s performance of the Trinket Circus was one big disappointment. Although no article about the events of the previous evening had been published yet, it seemed that news of the theft had got around in Rocky Beach.

The tent was not even half full and that was reflected in the mood of the performers. The performance lacked momentum. There was hardly any spark between magicians, artists, trainers and the spectators. The applause was half-hearted and although the show was routine in all points, there was no real atmosphere.

Jupiter, Pete and Bob, who this time were sitting directly at the exit to prevent people from leaving the tent in case of an emergency, waited anxiously for the highlight of the evening.

But Alois Copper didn’t feel half as eager to tell the scary story of his hunt for the monster in Alaska as he did the night before. Even Dunnerak seemed to have become more tame. Its roar was still frightening, but it still didn’t succeed in captivating the spectators. The show ended as unspectacularly as it had begun and when the final music blasted through the speakers and the spectators left the tent. The Three Investigators had to admit to themselves that it had not been the best idea to attend the show a second time.

"That was a waste of time," Pete summed up the evening aptly, as they stood in the cool evening air on Coffman's Meadow and watched the last guests get into their cars and drive home. "Absolutely nothing happened. And now what? Do we go home, too?"

"Ah, boys, there you are!" Alois Copper stepped out of the circus tent and approached them with arms spread wide open. "I saw you just now during the performance. It was nice of you to give us another chance after yesterday's little mishap. I'm sorry about this morning, but I had to get the generator problems under control, you know? A second blackout would have been the end of us. So, how did you enjoy the show?"

Even before anyone could answer, he raised his hands defensively. "Stop! Don't say it! We were bad today, I know. Everyone was afraid another disaster would happen, so no one was really relaxed... Oh well, there are these nights I can live with it."

"I'm happy for you that everything went smoothly," said Jupiter. "Actually, we had planned to help you because of yesterday."

He was guffawing with laughter. "Old Titus already warned me that sooner or later you would offer me your detective services. I wouldn't mind if you caught the thief and returned the poor mayor's wife's jewels."

"We were half hoping the perpetrator would strike a second time today," Bob said.

Jupiter noticed Mr Copper's irritated expression and quickly added: "Of course we are glad he didn't do it. But now, unfortunately, we lack a lead we can follow."

"Never mind, boys," Copper laughed and patted the First Investigator patronizingly on the shoulder. "Everyone has a bad day. It's just as well the varmint stayed away today."

Mr Copper's imposed cordiality was slowly getting on Jupiter's nerves. He wanted to say goodbye to him as soon as possible, but the circus director didn't give him a chance. Now that the tension of the performance had eased from him, he seemed to be in high spirits and spoke without a period or a comma. He told The Three Investigators about the old times with Titus Jones, about their common experiences with the circus and did not leave out any of the anecdotes that Jupiter had already heard from his uncle dozens of times.

For a solid hour, they stood in the middle of Coffman's Meadow, listening to Mr Copper with half an ear. Even after the lights at the tent had

gone out and the circus people had disappeared into their caravans, the director did not stop.

Just as Copper was facing Pete and talking to him incessantly, Jupiter looked around the arena bored. He let his gaze wander to the street. A slim man in a light grey trench coat stood under a street lamp and looked over at them. At first Jupiter thought he was watching them, but then he lit a cigarette and walked on until he disappeared behind the circus tent.

Finally, Bob used Copper's little breathing space to look at his watch and shouted: "Gracious me, it's that late! We really need to go home now!"

Mr Copper was disappointed to lose his spectators, but before he could start a new flood of words, The Three Investigators said goodbye to him and hurried to their bicycles, which they had parked at the edge of Coffman's Meadow.

"My goodness," Pete moaned. "He's nice, but it was very tiring listening to him. No wonder your uncle left the circus, Jupe. I couldn't have lasted long with a colleague like him."

As they unlocked their bikes, a vehicle that was parked next to the roller coaster suddenly started. The headlights flared up and an old, rickety truck drove across the meadow, past The Three Investigators and turned into the street.

They glanced after it.

"That was Pico, wasn't it?" asked Bob, who had recognized the slim man at the wheel.

Jupiter nodded. "That was him. Strange. I thought everyone but Mr Copper was asleep. Where is he going at this hour?"

8. A Scream in the Night

“Shall we go after him?” Pete suggested excitedly and had already swung himself onto the saddle, but the First Investigator waved off.

“Forget it, we’ll never catch him. It’s too bad we didn’t take the car today. I wish I knew where he was going.”

“Do you think he had something to do with the theft, Jupe?”

The First Investigator shrugged. “It’s possible. I don’t think this clown matters much.”

“He’s acting strange,” Bob agreed. “But that doesn’t mean anything. Maybe Lilly is right and we’re dealing with a common pickpocket. I’d say we’re at the end of our investigation.”

Nobody knew how to respond to that. Frustrated, they started off on their bikes and headed home.

It was late, the streets of Rocky Beach were deserted. The night owls, who were still on the road, probably took the coastal road to Santa Monica or Malibu Beach, where there was definitely more going on than in their little sleepy nest.

They were cycling through the villa district when Jupiter said: “We can’t just give up. We’ve never given up!”

“All right,” Bob replied. “But what are you gonna do? How are you gonna catch a thief who hasn’t left a trail?”

“I don’t know,” the First Investigator confessed as he rode around a bend. “But I’ll think of something! The Three Investigators have never—”

Suddenly, some thirty metres away, a huge black shadow scurried across the dark road and disappeared behind some bushes. Jupiter braked so abruptly that his bike skidded and he almost fell. “What was that?”

“I... I don’t know,” Pete stammered.

“What’s wrong?” Bob asked excitedly.

“Didn’t you see it?” Jupe asked.

“I was just looking over at you, Jupe,” Bob replied. “What did you see?”

“Something ran across the road.”

“So what? It was probably just a cat.” Bob remarked.

“That thing was about two metres tall!” cried Pete in a high-pitched voice.

“Sorry? Two metres?” Bob gasped. “Are you kidding me?”

“No,” answered Jupiter and got off the bike. “Come on, fellas, let’s have a closer look!”

“Are you crazy, Jupe? That thing looked dangerous!” Pete warned.

“Nonsense,” Jupe countered. “It was afraid of us, that’s why it ran away.”

He put his bike on the side of the road and crept towards the spot where the shadow had disappeared. Bob and Pete, by necessity, did the same.

“Maybe it was just a drunk who staggered across the road,” Bob whispered.

“It did not stagger,” Jupiter said. “It ran like lightning to the other side.”

“Then a drunk ran across the road.”

“Bob!” Pete said forcefully. “It wasn’t a drunk! It wasn’t human at all!”

“What... what does that mean?”

“Shhh!” Jupiter turned back and threw angry looks at them.

He had reached the spot where the shadow had disappeared. It was a narrow path between two hedge-lined plots of land, through which a drainage ditch ran.

“It went in here!” Jupe pointed.

Pete peered into the path which was only about one metre wide.

“It’s pitch dark in there,” he hissed. “You’re not going to follow that beast?”

“How else are we gonna find out what it was?” Jupiter insisted.

“Are you crazy? I’m not going in there! No way! It’s probably just waiting for us to follow it and then it’ll tear us apart with its giant claws!”

“Giant claws?” Bob asked. “I think you just saw a shadow. How do you know that it has—”

“I’ll tell you, Bob. Because from a distance, it looked just like the monster!” Pete said.

“What monster?”

“The monster from the circus!” Pete exclaimed. “Dunnerak!”

“What? Is that true, Jupe?”

The First Investigator hesitated. "I didn't see much. It was big and fury, but it seemed a little smaller than the monster."

"Because it stooped," Pete intervened. "I think that was Dunnerak."

"But that's impossible," Bob objected. "How could it get here? The beast is supposed to be in its cage! Besides, Lilly said it was harmless."

"Someone from the circus could be out here," Pete remarked. "But I saw it running all alone across the road!"

"I don't think it was the monster," Bob insisted.

"You didn't even see it," Pete said. "And even if it was something else, it did not look friendly. That's why I'm not going in there, so you two can go ahead."

"All right, you stay here," Jupiter agreed. "We'll see if it's still there. Come on, Bob."

Although Bob also had a bad feeling, he did not dare to oppose the First Investigator. He nodded and together they entered the dark path. The hedges were too high to be able to look over them. But on both sides, they saw noble villas towering over the top of the hedge. Their roofs punched black holes in the star-studded night sky. There was no light behind any of the windows. The ditch between the two hedges was dry and grassy, so they could move about almost silently.

Suddenly something rushed and cracked somewhere in front of them.

At once, the two detectives stopped and listened, but the sound was not repeated.

"What was that?" Bob asked.

"I wish I knew," Jupe replied. "It was a long way off, anyway."

"Shall... shall we really move on?"

"Why not? Now the noise is gone."

"You've got some nerve!" Bob remarked and carefully, they continued on their way.

"Pete was right," Bob whispered after a while. "You can't see anything. This... thing could come up any moment."

"If we don't see it, then it doesn't see us either," Jupiter claimed and groped his way further.

"But it can still hear us... Or smell us..." Bob suggested.

"Stop it, Bob! One hysterical detective is enough for me!" Jupiter stumbled and fell forward. As he propped his hands, he reached into something soft. A small scream escaped him.

"Jupe!" Bob exclaimed. "Jupe, what is it?"

“Nothing,” replied the First Investigator with a nervous laugh. “The trench ends here. I stumbled and reached into the grass. At first, I thought it was fur.”

Bob moaned. “Don’t ever scare me like that again. Does the path go on?”

Jupiter groped his way forward, but wherever he reached, there were hedges everywhere. “No. This is the end of the line.”

“And where did the thing go?”

“I have no... Wait a minute! Here’s something!” Jupe said.

“What?”

“A gap in the left hedge!” He narrowed his eyes to see in the pale light of the stars. “Looks like something big and heavy just rushed through the undergrowth. It must have been the crackling noise we heard.”

“Now what?”

“Let’s crawl through it.”

Before Bob could object, Jupiter already squeezed through the gap in the hedge. The thorny undergrowth scratched the back of his hands as he tried to protect his face. On the other side, he entered a carefully kept short lawn.

A villa, an old-fashioned, Spanish style building, rose majestically before him.

Jupiter paused for a moment and looked around. No one was to be seen. “The coast is clear!” he whispered.

Bob followed him with a groan. “Ouch!” he pressed out. “The brushwood! I hope whatever it was that thing hurt itself barging through here.”

“Anyway, the whatever-it-was is gone,” remarked Jupiter. “Come on, let’s go around the villa.”

Now that there were no more hedges, they suddenly felt strangely defenceless. The open lawn offered not the slightest cover. No shadows to hide in, no trees to climb up in case of emergency. If something was hiding behind the next corner of the house, one thing was certain—it would see them first.

“I don’t feel good about this, Jupe!” Bob whispered.

“Me neither,” confessed the First Investigator, who felt his accelerated heartbeat so clearly that he feared he could be heard inside the house. “But here we are. There is no point turning back now.”

“How nice of you to have a reason,” Bob remarked.

As they walked around the building, they were annoyed with the owner, who hadn't seen fit to plant even the tiniest tree in his vast garden.

Only a few climbing plants grew up the wall of the house on wooden trellis. If someone looked out the window, he would see them immediately.

"I can't help it, Jupe, but the thing seems to be gone. We've been walking all around. Nothing."

Jupiter dared to breathe a little easier. "Looks like it."

"Then we can turn back," Bob said quickly, before Jupiter could hatch a new mad idea. "The sooner the better—"

That's as far as he got.

A blood-curdling scream went through the night.

9. Arrested!

Pete trod restlessly from one foot to the other. He looked at his watch. It had only been three minutes since Bob and Jupiter went into the path, but it seemed like an eternity to the Second Investigator.

Again and again, he looked in both directions down the dark road. What if he saw the monster a second time running across the road? Should he go after it? What if he couldn't follow it? What if it chased him instead? What if it attacked him? A cold shiver ran down his spine at that thought. Perhaps it would have been better to go with them after all. Again he looked at his watch—four minutes. He became more and more uncomfortable.

Should he follow the two of them? But then Pete decided that it was a good sign if he didn't hear from his friends. If they were in danger, they would have screamed long ago.

Suddenly, he heard a noise. It sounded like a suppressed cough, not very far away. A night jogger? Pete listened, but heard no footsteps. The coughing repeated. It came from the next bend of the road. Pete was sure he hadn't heard footsteps since he'd been here. There was someone standing over there and had been for some time. Perhaps he was watching him.

The Second Investigator tried not to let on. Slowly, he walked up and down—first in front of the entrance of the path, then he extended the distance further and further. With each time, he approached the road bend a little more. A few more steps and he'd be able to take a look past the bend and see the stranger...

A shrill scream made him jump. He spun around. The scream came from the path between the hedges! Instantly, he chose to forget about the stranger down the road. Pete sprinted back.

It had not sounded like Jupe or Bob, but like a woman, but the scream had been so panicky that something terrible must have happened!

When the Second Investigator reached the entrance to the path, he hesitated only for a short moment. Then he stepped into the darkness and with limited visibility, he ran along the path as fast as he could.

Inside the house on the left side, lights flashed up behind the windows and the garden was lit by bright outdoor lamps, so bright that they even illuminated the path. With that light, Pete could run faster.

Then an angry roar echoed through the night. Pete stopped in his tracks and tried to listen to his gasping breath and pounding heartbeat. Something rushed and cracked in front of him. And then suddenly, a massive black shadow appeared at the end of the path running towards him!

Pete screamed, but could not move. He was paralyzed. With giant leaps, the thing came closer. Then Pete saw it and paused—shaggy, black fur, long arms, a bent posture and eyes that lit up cold.

It was Dunnerak! The monster rose to its full size, threw its head back and gave a deafening roar. In one bound, it leapt towards Pete. The Second Investigator threw himself to the side at the last second and Dunnerak dashed past him. Pete turned around and prepared for a second attack, but instead of coming back to Pete, the monster ran further along the path to the road.

A few moments later, it had disappeared. Pete pulled himself up. He wanted to get out of the path as quickly as possible, out into the light, before the monster changed its mind and came back. But his legs trembled so much that he could hardly put one foot in front of the other. He stumbled, fell into the hedge and tore his shirt.

Half out of his senses, he freed himself from the thorny undergrowth, hurried on and finally reached the gap in the hedge leading into the illuminated garden. With a last panicked look back into the path, he went through the gap. His foot got caught and he fell onto the lawn where he lay down for a moment to catch his breath.

“Pete!” That was Bob’s voice. “My goodness, Pete! Jupe, it attacked and hurt him!”

The Second Investigator raised his head and saw his friends running towards him. They bent down and Bob asked anxiously: “What happened, Pete? Are you all right? My goodness, your shirt!”

“All is well,” Pete assured, groaning. “I am not hurt.”

“But the scratches...” Bob stammered.

“It was the stupid hedge, not the monster,” Pete muttered.

Jupiter helped the Second Investigator up. “So you saw it too?”

“Not just see it... It almost ran right into me,” Pete explained. “I heard the scream and ran into the path immediately. Then I saw the monster

running towards me. It was roaring like crazy and I was so scared that I almost died.” The memory of it made him tremble again.

“Did it attack you?” Bob asked breathlessly.

“Yes. That is... maybe not,” Pete tried to recall. “It just came at me. I just managed to throw myself aside... Jupe! Bob! It really was the monster! It was right in front of me! It... it...”

“Calm down, Pete!” said Jupiter emphatically. “It’s gone now.”

Pete threw a glance back at the hedge, but everything remained calm there. Jupe was right. It was gone. Slowly his pulse calmed down and his legs obeyed his will again. He swallowed with difficulty and then asked, “Tell me, who was that screaming?”

“Someone in the house,” replied Jupiter. “We had just searched the garden, without success, when a woman screamed. The lights went on, first in the house, then out here. And suddenly, the monster appeared.”

“Did it see you?”

“I don’t think so. We were just over there when it suddenly appeared from the corner of the house and ran across the lawn to the hedge. We only saw its back. It looked like it was running away from the light.”

Bob nodded. “Remember what Lilly and Copper said? Dunnerak is very light shy, so it’s always in a darkened cage during the day and only comes out when the lighting is dim. Perhaps the fact that the lights suddenly came on was our salvation. Who knows what the monster would have done otherwise.”

Pete quickly suppressed the thought of it. He looked around indecisively. “What do we do now? We should check on the house residents, right? Whoever was screaming, maybe it wasn’t just from shock.”

Bob and Jupiter looked at each other. They hadn’t even thought of that! Maybe someone in the house needed help!

They immediately ran forward, climbed the short stairs to the veranda and rang the front doorbell. It remained quiet. They rang the bell again and when still nothing moved, Jupiter hammered at the door and called: “Hello! Can you hear me? Do you need help?”

“Get out!” a frail female voice whined, barely audible and then broke out in a sob.

“Did she tell us to leave?” Pete asked whisperingly.

“Sounded like it.” Jupiter tried again. “We want to help you! Please open the door!”

Now the whimpering grew into a terrified scream.

"My goodness! Something is wrong in there," cried the First Investigator. "We've got to get inside somehow! Pete, did you bring your tools?"

The Second Investigator scanned his pockets for the black case containing his lock picks and shook his head. "It's still in the jeans from yesterday. Maybe there's a window open somewhere."

"We've already checked earlier," Bob replied. "The balcony door on the first floor is just ajar, nothing else."

"We'll just have to climb," Pete said and jumped down the porch.
"Where is the balcony?"

"On the other side," Bob said.

They walked around the house once. Right next to the balcony, green tendrils grew up a wooden trellis that was mounted on the outside wall.

"Perfect," Pete said nodding. "I suppose I'm the only one who can get up there without any trouble."

"Well, I can't do it!" said Jupiter quickly and patted himself on his full stomach.

"Me neither," Bob added just as quickly. "I, uh... Oh, come on, Pete, we all know you're the right guy for this!"

The Second Investigator nodded. "Right. I just wanted to hear that again." He reached for the trellis and pulled himself up. But the climbing proved to be more difficult than expected. The tendrils kept on pretending to hold on tight, but gave way at the last moment. "I'm going to destroy all the plants," moaned Pete. "Although... it almost seems as if someone has already done that before me. A lot of branches and leaves have been torn off here. Looks fresh to me."

"You'll be all right, Pete," Bob said encouragingly.

Then Pete saw a glimmer of light from the corners of his eyes. A constant red-blue glow shimmered over the house wall. Then he heard the banging of car doors. "Someone's coming," he whispered.

"Not just anyone," contradicted Jupiter, who had recognized the light. "That's the police!"

Pete had not yet reached the top when suddenly policemen appeared on both sides of the garden. They saw The Three Investigators, pulled out their guns and shouted: "Freeze!"

Jupiter raised his arms reassuringly. "Don't panic, we won't flee! We are here to help. We—"

“Get down!” cried one of the men who had just discovered Pete. “Get down now!”

“But I—” Pete stammered.

“Right away!” The order sounded so threatening that Pete decided to make a run for it. He jumped the last two metres and landed safely on the grass.

“We are not the ones you should be worrying about,” Jupiter tried again. “Inside the house are—”

“Hands up!” barked an officer. Four of them came towards them.
“Hands up and against the wall!”

The Three Investigators had no choice. “Listen to me, we just happened to be here! Whoever called you, she—”

“You can tell all that at the police station!” growled the policeman and turned Jupiter’s arms behind his back. A second later, the cold steel of the handcuffs wrapped around his joints.

“You’re all under arrest!”

10. A Terrible Discovery

“A monster?” Inspector Cotta didn’t bat an eyelid. His eyes wandered slowly from one investigator to the other. Then he bent over slightly and typed on the computer keyboard.

Finally, he turned the monitor so that The Three Investigators could read what he had written: ‘The suspects claim to have seen a monster in the victim’s garden.’ How do you think my superiors will feel when I deliver this report tomorrow?”

“I know how this must sound to you, sir,” Jupiter said. “But you asked for the truth, and this is it. We saw a monster.”

The Three Investigators had been taken to Rocky Beach Police Department. None of them had been able to convince the officers of their innocence, so they had been put into a car and driven here immediately. It was their good fortune that Inspector Cotta was on late duty today.

Inspector Cotta was The Three Investigators’ main contact at the Rocky Beach Police Department. With his help, they had been able to successfully solve many cases in the past. In turn, the three had often provided information for the police to solve criminal activities. In the course of time an almost friendly relationship had developed between them and the police.

The inspector had immediately intervened on their behalf and saved them from being interrogated by an officer who thought they were three juvenile burglars. They had to undergo an interrogation anyway, but in the familiar atmosphere of Cotta’s office.

The inspector sat opposite them at the desk, sighed and leaned back. “All right. The whole story again from the beginning. Maybe there’s something I’m missing. So you wanted to go home from the circus and—” There was a knock on the door. “Come in!”

A young officer appeared in the doorway. “You wanted to see me, sir?”

“Yes, Jackson, come in, close the door and tell me exactly what happened!”

Mr Jackson threw an uncertain look at The Three Investigators and hesitantly delivered his report. “At 11 pm, we received a call from Mrs Berger. She said something had been into her house and was now skulking around the garden. She sounded very worried, so we sent two available patrol cars to the address at once. I was in one of them. We caught one of these three young lads trying to climb onto Mrs Berger’s balcony and arrested all three of them.”

“All right,” Cotta nodded. “So far I know the story. What did Mrs Berger say?”

“Nothing at all at first, sir, because she was completely upset and not able to talk to us at all. When she had finally calmed down a bit, she told us a very strange story. She went to bed early like every night and slept with the balcony door open. Then suddenly she woke up from a noise. A... a huge black shadow was in her bedroom. She turned on the light and saw a... well, she called it a creature. A creature she’d never seen before, big, black, hairy, some kind of a monster. I know it sounds crazy, sir, but she stuck with that story.”

Inspector Cotta looked over at The Three Investigators. His expression was hard to interpret. “No, Jackson, it doesn’t sound all that crazy. Go on. What else did Mrs Berger say?”

“The creature was about to plunder her jewellery box. When the light came on, however, it escaped over the balcony. She immediately turned on all the lights in the house and garden and called the police. Then the doorbell rang and she feared it might be... well, the creature. Someone banged on the door and called out for her, but she was far too frightened to come out of her bedroom.”

“That was us,” Jupiter interrupted him. “We just wanted to help her. She might have been hurt.”

“So a creature had attempted to take her jewellery,” Cotta summed up. “Has anything been stolen?”

“No. She must have driven the creature away in time.”

“Thank you, Jackson. You can go. And tell Mrs Berger those three boys were not the culprits.” The young officer nodded and opened the door. Then he turned and said: “Shall I include the creature in the report, sir?”

“Postpone the report until tomorrow and then ask me again,” Cotta replied tonelessly. When Jackson had left, he said: “A monster. Why do

such incredible stories always land on my desk when the three of you are involved?”

“I don’t know, sir,” replied Jupiter.

“I can’t shake the feeling that you didn’t happen to be in the wrong place at the right time. So what do you know about this? What’s the story with this monster?”

“We would be glad if we knew that, Inspector,” Jupiter said quickly before Bob or Pete could answer. “But we came across this thing today absolutely by chance.”

Cotta squinted his eyes together suspiciously. “Really? It doesn’t have anything to do with that circus story from last night? It has come to my attention that there was a small, unpleasant incident. Remarkably, the terms ‘monster’ and ‘jewellery’ were used here as well. And you were at the circus show tonight, weren’t you? Tell me if I’m wrong, Jupiter Jones, but it doesn’t sound like a coincidence.”

Jupiter hated it when Cotta asked such questions. What should he tell him? He had no idea what was going on himself. “Right, the thing with the mayor and his wife,” he played clueless. “Did she file a complaint against the circus people?”

“No. I know the story from the superintendent who is friends with the mayor. The jewellery that was stolen from his wife was fake, so she dropped the charges. But you’re avoiding my question. Tell me, what do you know about this?”

“Nothing at all,” Jupiter affirmed. “We were at the said performance yesterday. I admit we have tried to investigate, but without result so far. And tonight’s incident was purely accidental.”

Cotta tiredly rubbed his eyes. “All right. It’s late, boys. You have to go home and so do I. My shift ends in twenty minutes and I’ve decided not to work overtime today for once. I’ll postpone the report and everything else until tomorrow. Maybe I will call you in the next few days so that you can put everything on record again. At this moment, I am reluctant to tell my colleagues to search for a monster burglar. Go on, get out of here! And don’t you dare stumble into another crime—at least not before my next vacation!”

Relieved, they stood up, said goodbye to Inspector Cotta and left the police department.

“Man, he wouldn’t let up at all,” Pete moaned as they stood on the street at night. “I hope he won’t bother us again. Is it my fault that I saw a

monster?"

"Oh no!" mumbled Bob.

"What?" Pete asked.

"Our bikes. They're still outside Mrs Berger's house."

"Then we might as well go get them back now," Jupiter said.

As they walked through the deserted streets of Rocky Beach, they found themselves avoiding dark corners, passing unlit driveways faster and looking around again and again.

Jupiter finally said something about the case: "So we are dealing with a thieving monster. It stole from the mayor's wife and tried the same thing on Mrs Berger. Both times without much success. It is most puzzling."

"I know that undertone in your voice," Pete said ominously. "You have another plan, haven't you?"

"Just a very small one," Jupiter said. "Since we are going to get our bikes, I think we should go back to the circus."

"Then what?" Pete asked.

"See if Dunnerak is in its cage or not," Jupiter decided.

"Are you crazy?" Pete gasped. "What do we do if the monster is prowling around? It seems to have escaped. What makes you think it's gonna sit quietly in its cage again?"

"Not at all. I just want to know if there's been any change at the circus... If there's anyone still awake... If Mr Copper or the others heard what happened... If that clown Pico has come back... I just want to check on these things."

Bob and Pete knew that there was no point in objecting. So they gave in to their fate and once they got their bikes back, they rode back to Coffman's Meadow.

In the circus, everything was dark. There was no light anywhere, and everybody seemed to be asleep. The truck that Pico had left in was back in its place.

"All is quiet," Pete whispered. "So we can go home."

"Not until we have looked around the animal tent," Jupiter instructed and set about climbing over the barrier that separated the circus grounds from the rest of the meadow.

"Jupe, we really should be careful!" Pete warned.

"We are," Jupe assured him.

They crept towards the dark tent and stopped in front of the entrance to listen. Something was different. They heard the sounds of the animals,

but it did not sound as they had expected.

“Shouldn’t the goats be asleep?” Bob asked uncertainly. “Or don’t goats sleep?”

“Not only are they not sleeping, they sound kind of nervous, don’t you think?” Pete made one last attempt to keep Jupiter from going into the tent. “I’m sure the monster is in there. And it’s not in its cage. Come on, Jupe, we better get out of here!”

“So far it hasn’t hurt us.”

“That can change,” Pete said. “What do we do when we scare it? You know, an animal that’s scared sometimes reacts—”

The First Investigator didn’t let him finish, but pushed the tarpaulin resolutely to the side and tied it tightly so that some light fell into the tent. A horse stomped nervously. Hannibal grunted. Pete was right, the animals were restless. There was Dunnerak’s cage. Behind the black cloth, it was quiet.

No snorting, no growling. Either the monster was asleep, or it wasn’t there.

Jupiter went towards the cage. Now he got scared too. His hand trembled as he reached out for the black cloth.

“Jupe!” Bob’s call held him back. In an instant, the animals became even louder.

“Have you gone mad? Can you keep your voice down—” Jupe whispered.

“Someone’s lying here!” Bob pointed to the ground. “Oh, my goodness, it’s Carter!”

Jupiter turned around. Half hidden behind a black box from Madame Yasemin’s magic show, the trainer lay motionless on the floor. The First Investigator knelt down—and was startled!

Carter’s face was covered in blood. The blood was slowly seeping from a nasty laceration on his forehead. His clothes were torn and his skin was scratched. It was like he was involved in a fight—a fight with a superior force.

11. The Empty Cage

“Carter!” said Jupiter insistently and touched the man on the shoulder.
“Carter, wake up!” No response.

“Is he...” Pete began.

“No, Pete, he’s breathing, but he’s unconscious. Quick, we need an ambulance! Run and wake up Mr Copper!”

The Second Investigator didn’t need to be told twice. He wanted to get out of that tent as quickly as possible. He immediately stumbled outside and looked around frantically. Which caravan was Mr Copper’s? Quickly, Pete stepped forward to the nearest one and knocked violently against the door. “Open up! We need an ambulance!”

Finally, the light went on and a few seconds later, the door was opened. But it was not Mr Copper, but Lilly, who stood opposite him in her pyjamas and looked at him sleepily and confused. “Pete? What are you doing here? What—”

“Carter is unconscious in the animal tent,” Pete said quickly. “Do you have a phone?”

Suddenly Lilly was wide awake. “Carter? What happened?”

“I don’t know. But call an ambulance!”

Even before the ambulance came, the whole circus had woken up. Madame Yasemin and Mr Copper stood in robes around the motionless Carter, whom Bob and Jupiter had meanwhile carried outside. Only Pico was still wearing jeans and a T-shirt. Lilly bent over the unconscious man in concern and dabbed the blood from his forehead.

“Who could have done this?” Half questioning, half accusing, she looked at The Three Investigators.

“We don’t know,” Pete affirmed. “We only found him by chance!”

“What were you doing here in the middle of the night anyway?” Pico barked suspiciously.

“We... we...” Pete stammered as he desperately considered what he should reveal about their nightly experiences.

“We had a very strange encounter today,” Jupiter came to his aid. “So we decided to come here to see what’s going on.”

“A strange encounter?” repeated Mr Copper. “What do you mean?”

“We saw Dunnerak. About an hour ago on a road in the Rocky Beach residential district.”

Everyone stared at him in disbelief.

“Dunnerak?” Copper gasped. His face darkened as he made a throw-away gesture. “Spare us your tasteless jokes, Jupiter Jones. One of my people has been seriously injured! I suppose you’re going to tell us that Dunnerak knocked him out.”

“That would be my guess,” Jupiter admitted bluntly. “But I have no proof of this. I think the hospital will be able to determine where the injuries came from.”

“Don’t talk nonsense!” Lilly said to him. “It was not Dunnerak.”

“How can you be so sure?” Jupe asked.

“Somehow, I just know it,” Lilly replied.

“Mr Copper,” Jupiter said seriously. “We’d just been to the animal tent and found Carter there. The animals were very excited, apparently they sensed something was wrong. Only that there wasn’t the slightest noise coming from Dunnerak’s cage.”

“It’s asleep,” Copper growled reluctantly.

“Have you looked?” Jupiter questioned.

“No. But it’s always sleeping at this time.”

“You said it is shy of light,” Jupiter countered. “If it is, then it must be a nocturnal animal and therefore wide awake by now.”

“Don’t talk nonsense!”

“Maybe it’s not in its cage. How about you check it out?” Jupiter insisted.

“That is not necessary,” Mr Copper assured emphatically. “And now stop this nonsense! The monster is absolutely harmless and has absolutely nothing to do with Carter’s injury.”

“It walked through Rocky Beach tonight!” Pete interferred. He couldn’t understand the ignorance of these people. “We saw it!”

“I don’t know why you are telling me this fairy tale, but I would like to ask you to go home immediately!” Mr Copper said with anger.

Jupiter made one last attempt. “There is a police report about what we saw tonight. I suspect that a police officer will show up here tomorrow during the day to ask you a few questions. He will want to take a look at the monster. If, contrary to your belief, it is not in its cage, you’d better figure out how to explain this to the police, Mr Copper.”

Alois Copper looked at him with a mixture of fear and anger, but just as he was about to respond, the ambulance's blue light flickered across the arena.

"At last!" gasped Lilly, and Pico ran towards the ambulance to show the paramedics the way.

The paramedics looked in on Carter, felt his pulse and got a stretcher. The Three Investigators took a few steps back so as not to disturb them in their work.

While the other circus people stood together, Madame Yasemin approached the three of them. Her eyes wandered from one to the other. "I believe you," she finally said.

"Really?" Pete asked hopefully. "Then tell Mr Copper! Tell him to check the cage. Tell him —"

She raised her hand. "I believe you saw something. But it was not Dunnerak."

"Then what was it?" Pete asked.

"Something evil is going on. A creature of the night is threatening this city. Be careful! Beware of the dark!"

Jupiter jumped up when Bob and Pete opened the door to Headquarters. He must have fallen asleep. They were not surprised. The last night had been exhausting. After the ambulance had left, Copper had literally chased them off the circus grounds. That had the advantage that they'd made it home just in time before midnight. But when had Jupiter finally found sleep? At three? He didn't know. In any case, the alarm clock had rung at seven on the dot and Jupiter had staggered to school.

"Hey, I thought you were thinking!" cried Pete. "Instead, you look like you are half-asleep."

"Sorry. I'm just dead tired."

"You're not the only one... But do you now have a plan?" Pete asked.

"Not really," the First Investigator confessed. "I thought we'd talk things over first."

"What's there to talk through?" Bob asked and fell dully into the armchair. "Our prime suspect, Pico, was acting very strangely yesterday, don't you think? He didn't say anything at all. And he was the only one still wearing his regular clothes. Here's how I see it—when we saw him drive away in the truck yesterday, he had the monster in the back. He drove over to Mrs Berger's, let Dunnerak out and—"

“Of course I do!” Pete struck his forehead with the flat of his hand. “You’re right, Bob. There was one thing I completely forgot. There was someone else there last night.”

“Someone else? Who was it?” Bob asked.

“Yesterday, while I was waiting for you on the road outside the path, I suddenly heard someone coughing around the next bend. I wanted to go and check, but then Mrs Berger screamed and I got distracted. That was definitely Pico waiting for the monster! It all adds up. After the monster almost ran into me, it went to Pico, and they went back to the circus, and that’s where Dunnerak knocked down Carter.”

“And why?” Bob asked.

“I don’t know. Maybe out of anger because the break-in didn’t work.”

“As proof, we definitely need Carter’s testimony,” said Jupiter. “But I think we should go to Mr Copper first and check him out again. Because he too has something to hide, as it became abundantly clear yesterday. He wants to avoid us looking into the cage at all costs. And why is that? Because there’s something in there that we wouldn’t expect.”

“Sooner or later, he’ll have to reveal the secret,” Pete said.

Bob nodded. “At the latest when the police show up at his place. After all, there are now four witnesses who have seen the monster. And one seriously injured.”

“The police will just have to follow up on that,” Jupe remarked. “I’ll think of something.”

Bob reached into the inside pocket of his jacket and pulled out a rolled-up newspaper. “Have you seen this yet?” He opened a page and threw it on the desk. The headlines were emblazoned on the front page of *Rocky Beach Today*: ‘Monster Show Blackout: Jewel Thief Strikes.’

“What does it say?” Pete asked and reached for the paper to skim the article.

“What we expected,” Bob replied. “A richly distorted truth designed to cast the circus in a bad light. After this article, I’d be surprised if they can sell twenty tickets for tonight’s performance—if there will be one at all. I wonder if Carter’s back on his feet yet.”

“Did they write anything about the monster?” Pete asked.

“Yes, but nothing specific. Just enough to make you afraid to go to the circus.”

“Mr Copper will have to come up with something to repair the damage.” Jupiter pinched his lower lip. “Perhaps this will be to our

advantage.”

“What are you thinking?” Pete asked.

“We’ve been going about it the wrong way so far. We showed up at Copper’s and demanded explanations. It’s only natural that he should be angry. We have to sell him the story differently—by offering to help him. If we can assure him that we’ll straighten things out for him, he might finally come clean.”

“And if he doesn’t?” Pete asked.

“Then this is a clue that he is hiding something.”

Pete sighed. “I can only hope this is not one of his moody days.”

Alois Copper was not in a good mood. To find that out, The Three Investigators didn’t even have to talk to him. Because when they rolled their bicycles onto the circus grounds, they could hear the director’s bass voice roaring.

“That sounds like trouble,” Pete remarked. “Who’s he yelling at?”

“We’ll see about that.” They parked their bikes and followed the roar until they got between the caravans. Mr Copper had a bright red face and spoke loudly and extremely angrily to a young man whom The Three Investigators had never seen before. He was carrying a large camera around his neck and had a notepad in his hand.

“That’s the biggest load of baloney I’ve ever heard!” Copper just yelled. “I don’t know where you picked that up, and I don’t care. In any case, it’s not true!”

“But I spoke to Mrs Berger personally. And she swore she saw your circus monster... what was it called?”

“Listen, interview Mrs Berger for all I care, but leave me alone!”

The reporter remained calm. “I can understand if you don’t want to give any information about this case. If I were you, I probably wouldn’t do so in such a situation either. But one little photo of your monster is not going to hurt anyone.”

“Yes. It will. Now get out of here.”

“But—”

“Get out, I said, or I’ll throw you to the lions myself!”

“You have lions too? Wouldn’t it be possible that—”

“Get out of here!” Copper yelled so loud that the journalist actually fell silent and took a step back.

“All right. But I’m gonna write about it, so I hope you know that.”

“Do what you want,” growled Copper.

The reporter turned around and left.

“Do you really think this is the right time to offer Mr Copper our help?” Pete whispered.

“This is the perfect time,” claimed Jupiter and approached the circus director determinedly. “Good afternoon, Mr Copper!”

“You again. What’s good about this afternoon? Get out of here!” His black moustache shook with rage.

“We’re sorry, sir, that you’re having so much trouble, but that’s why we’re here. We want to help you.”

“Help?” He laughed. “You? So far you’ve only been a nuisance.”

“That was not our intention,” assured Jupiter. “In fact, our main concern from the beginning was to solve the mystery of the stolen jewellery. The fact that a few more mysteries have been added since then makes the matter all the more urgent, don’t you think? As you know, my friends and I specialize in unsolved mysteries and would like to offer you our services. We—”

“Jupe!” cried Pete.

The First Investigator winced. He had just been on a roll and had managed to silence Mr Copper, so why did Pete have to interrupt him now? “What is it?”

“The reporter! He just went into the animal tent!”

“What?” Copper thundered, stomping towards the tent with giant strides. The Three Investigators followed him. He tore the tarpaulin aside.

The reporter, scared to death, took a step back. But a moment later, he had already regained his composure. Accusingly, he pointed to Dunnerak’s cage, whose cloth had been drawn back. “I hope you have a good explanation for this!”

The cage was empty.

12. The Secret of the Monster

“So it is true! Your monster has escaped!”

Copper stepped up to the man, pushed him roughly to the side and drew the curtain. “Get out of here,” he yelled. “Now!”

In a flash, the reporter raised his camera and took a picture of the raging director. Then he turned and ran away before Mr Copper could snatch his camera. By the time Copper and The Three Investigators went out of the animal tent, the reporter was gone.

For a while, Mr Copper stood there, stiff as a poker and breathing heavily, staring at his circus tent. The Three Investigators were not sure if he was even aware of their presence.

He let his shoulders down. “It’s all over now.”

Jupiter stepped carefully towards him. “Mr Copper?”

“Huh?”

“Mr Copper, we’d really like to help you.”

“No one can help me anymore. The circus is ruined. This... this hack will put his nonsense in the paper and no more visitors will come.”

“Not if we can figure out what’s behind all this. We’re detectives and _____”

“Yes, I know,” Copper muttered. “But believe me, there’s nothing to clear up. The truth is a lie. That’s what makes it all so terrible.”

The Three Investigators looked at each other helplessly. “Could... could you explain that?”

Mr Copper was silent for a while. He looked sadly from one to the other. “It doesn’t matter now anyway. You’ve seen that the cage is empty. If you like, I can tell you Dunnerak’s secret. Maybe... maybe you can think of something to limit the damage I’ve done.”

Jupiter nodded. “Go ahead. Tell us the story.”

Copper sighed heavily. “There is no monster. And there never was...”

“What?” cried Bob and Pete at the same time. Only Jupiter did not seem particularly surprised.

“The whole Dunnerak story is one big lie,” Mr Copper revealed.

“But... but we saw it,” Pete contradicted him. “Yesterday and the day before yesterday in the circus and last night on the road!”

The director smiled tiredly. “What you saw in the ring was not a real monster.”

“Then what is it?” Bob asked.

“It was Pico in a disguise. A black fur suit and a latex mask with hair on it.”

Bob shook his head. “That was not a man in disguise. The arms were much too long. There’s no such thing as a man with arms that long.”

“You got that right,” agreed Mr Copper. “When we first put Pico into a normal costume, it looked ridiculous. So we had to come up with something to make a monster out of a human. Pico himself came up with the idea of lengthening the arms and developed a kind of mechanical hand, whose movements he can control with his own hand. If you stretch the fur over this construction, it looks as if the arm is much longer. A simple trick, but it is enough to make the spectators believe that what they are seeing can in no way be human.”

“And that inhuman roar?” Pete asked, as he still couldn’t quite believe the story.

“It comes through a voice distorter built into the mask. A simple child’s toy, nothing more.”

“But we heard the monster growl yesterday and the day before—not in the circus, but in its cage!” Pete said.

Instead of answering, Copper went to the animal tent and waved The Three Investigators over. “Come on!”

Curiously, they followed him into the darkness, where the horses snorted quietly and Hannibal snored. Mr Copper went over to Dunnerak’s cage and pulled the black cloth aside. Then he reached through the bars and burrowed the straw that covered the floor. Shortly after that, a gruesome growl and rumble sounded. It was as if he had awakened an invisible monster in the cage.

“A recorder!” cried Jupiter in surprise. “And you had it running all the time?”

“Yes, whenever I feared a trespasser might stray this way. It’s an endless tape, playing Dunnerak’s eerie sounds to unsuspecting people until I turn it off.” He laughed softly. “We call this recorder the monster box.”

“What about that scar you show the spectators at every performance?” Pete asked.

Copper laughed softly. "I got this off a tent pole that once nearly tore my arm off."

"And the flesh that Dunnerak eats?" Pete continued.

"Pico doesn't actually eat it, he makes it disappear into the costume."

"All right," Pete said. "So Pico slips into the costume after his clown act and played the scary monster. But why all the act?"

"That is quite clear, Pete," replied Jupiter. "Dunnerak is a crowd-puller and therefore a sure source of money. Right, Mr Copper? The circus was in bad shape. They desperately needed an attraction. The monster was the perfect way to attract spectators in a cost-effective manner."

"That's right, Jupiter. We were on the verge of bankruptcy," Mr Copper explained. "Then we hired Carter with his gorilla act, who also brought the roller coaster, but that didn't pull us out of the red either. Finally, we got the idea to go on tour with a monster... And it worked. Dunnerak is a hit. Everybody wants to see it!"

"But in order not to make a fool of ourselves, we had to make sure that the fairy tale of the monster from Alaska was as real as possible. Hence the thing with the covered cage and the monster box. And that's also why we dim the lights at the show. We want people to see just enough of Dunnerak to scare them, nothing more. I was determined to keep the fact that there is no monster at all from you too. Once the truth has been leaked somewhere, it can happen very quickly that the rest of the world finds out about it. There... now you know the whole story. Now I hope you believe me when I tell you that Dunnerak has nothing to do with the thefts."

"I can accept that I fell for a clown in a monster costume at the performance," Pete said. "But what did we see last night? What was that thing that nearly ran me down?"

Mr Copper shook his head. "I don't know. Someone's... someone's playing a joke on us, and I can't explain it any other way."

"Could it..." Pete began timidly. "Could it not be that someone from the circus is behind this? I mean, somehow the culprit must have got to the costume. We saw Pico leaving the circus last night, and—"

"Absolutely not! None of us would do such a thing. Pico probably only went out for a drink, which he often does when he can't sleep. The costume must have been a fake. It was dark when you saw it. There's someone else behind this."

"Fine," Jupiter nodded and pinched his lower lip. "But who? And is the jewel thief also the one who put Carter in the hospital?"

They remained silent for a while, thoughtfully.

Finally Bob said: "That's not the only problem we have. The reporter just now obviously drew the wrong conclusions. He believes that the monster really exists and that it has now escaped. I'm sure we'll read the story in the paper tomorrow and all hell will break loose. I don't think you can avoid telling the public the truth about Dunnerak, Mr Copper."

"But that won't change the situation," Jupiter interjected. "If you tell the truth, the spectators will run away. And the sceptics will continue to believe that you or your people had something to do with the break-in at Mrs Berger's. If you don't, the whole world will believe a dangerous monster is walking around Rocky Beach and you'll be responsible."

Copper nodded low. "I told you before, it's all over now."

"Not necessarily," Jupiter said. "If we can catch the perpetrator before the story breaks, we can prevent the catastrophe."

"And how are you going to do that?" Mr Copper asked.

"Jupiter will think of something," said Pete confidently. "Isn't that right, Jupe?"

The First Investigator just nodded. "The first thing we need to know is who could be responsible. After all, the perpetrator is not simply a jewel thief, because then he could have saved himself the disguise. No, it must be someone who wants to harm the circus. Can you think of anyone?"

The director thought for a while, but then shook his head. "No. We still have a lot of debt, but only to the bank. I really don't know anyone who could do this to us."

"Maybe the thief isn't after you," Jupiter said. "Maybe he's after one of your people."

"Well, we've all known each other for years. I think I would know if someone was in trouble."

"Really? What about Carter? Somebody beat him up pretty bad last night. And if it wasn't the monster, it must have been someone else. Who do you think, Mr Copper?" Jupiter probed.

"Believe me, I don't know!"

Jupiter pinched his lower lip. "All right. The first step will be to ask Carter himself. Once he's conscious, we'll go to the hospital. Hopefully, he can tell us who attacked him."

"All right, boys. And... thank you so much for trying to help me. I'm sorry I was so rough on you."

"Already forgotten," Jupiter said, conciliatorily.

They said goodbye to the circus director and returned to their bicycles.

“Very mysterious,” Bob muttered as he unlocked his bike. “A monster that doesn’t exist, a jewel robbery at the circus, a burglary and a mysterious stranger who’s after Carter.”

“My head is already spinning,” said Pete.

“And there is something else,” said Jupiter.

“What?” Pete asked.

“It’s just a feeling, but... Mr Copper has been so vigorously defending his people without even really thinking about your question on whether someone from the circus was behind this. I can’t prove it, but I had the impression that he is still hiding something!”

13. Human or Beast?

“It’s pretty obvious,” said Bob while discussing the case as they sat in the garden chairs outside Headquarters in the sun, relaxing with orange juice and the rest of Pete’s birthday cake. “Even though we now know that there is no real monster, it must have been Pico. Everything fits together.”

“Does it really?” asked Jupiter and counted on his fingers what had happened and whether it fitted with Bob’s theory. “First there was the robbery at the circus tent. By then, Pico was already wearing the monster costume. He could have sabotaged the power supply and then gone back and robbed the mayor’s wife. That would explain why she claimed something hairy touched her.”

“But why did he do it right after the monster act?” Pete asked. “That would arouse suspicion too quickly, at least among circus people who know who’s under the costume.”

“After Dunnerak’s performance, the tension in the tent was at its highest—and with it the panic when the power went out,” said Jupiter. “So Pico could be reasonably sure that he wouldn’t be caught.”

“And as for the circus people,” Bob continued. “It’s possible they’re all in cahoots and they’re all protecting each other now. The circus is not doing well financially. It’s the perfect way to make a living robbing spectators.”

Jupiter looked at Bob in surprise. “Interesting theory... but still very improbable. Because Copper knows very well that this story will do more harm than good to the circus, even if the stolen jewellery was worth thousands of dollars. But it wasn’t. Actually, one should assume that nothing is left to chance in such an action and make sure that the loot can really be cashed in. No, I think the perpetrator was less concerned with stealing jewellery and more concerned with hurting the circus.”

“It could still be Pico,” Bob threw in. “Who knows what’s going on inside that person. I find him strange. Maybe he has a reason for doing this. We just don’t know what it is yet.”

“And which Mr Copper also keeps from us,” Jupiter added. “Let’s check out the rest of the story. Last night, we saw Pico driving off

Coffman's Meadow. Then we met the monster on the road."

"He would have had plenty of time to get into the costume," Bob said. "And there's something else—Pete barely got up the trellis, while the monster had no problem at all. We all know what a good climber Pete is. I can only think of one reason why the thief could be so much better at climbing than Pete. He is an artist. Pico may be a clown and juggler, but he's been with the circus for years. I imagine you learn a lot from your colleagues during that time."

Pete had remarkably restrained himself during the discussion. A steep wrinkle of doubt appeared on his forehead as he sank deeper and deeper into the chair.

"What about you, Pete?" Jupiter asked. "Do you want to leave all the brain work to us again?"

"I don't know," Pete replied reluctantly. "It all sounds very logical, what you're trying to put together, but..."

"But what?" Jupe probed.

"You did not see the monster—at least not up close. I did. He was standing right in front of me. And it... it wasn't human."

"But Pete! But Copper has admitted it's a human in a costume," Bob exclaimed.

"Maybe so. But what I saw was everything but a human being." Pete looked at his two friends. It was not difficult to read their thoughts on their faces—they thought he was crazy. "I know it sounds stupid, but no human being looks like that!"

"It was a costume," Bob remarked insecurely.

"Nobody moves like that!"

"An artist does," Bob added.

"Nobody roars like that!"

"He has a voice distorter in his mask, remember?" Bob insisted.

Pete lowered his head. "You must think I'm an idiot, but I just don't believe that that thing that almost knocked me down was just a clown in disguise. It was something else."

Jupiter and Bob looked at each other at a loss. Pete tended to believe in the supernatural rather than logic. But they had rarely seen him so persistent.

"Well, we only saw it from a distance," Bob finally admitted. "I guess it could have been a human being, but not necessarily."

“What’s this all about?” Jupiter suddenly got excited. “We have a suspect, we have a confession from Mr Copper, we have a theory which becomes more and more likely with each new piece of evidence. What makes you think you can throw all that away now?”

“I’ll only tell you what I saw,” Pete defended himself. “It’s not my fault you were so far away. I’m afraid there’s no other witness. Maybe we should ask Mrs Berger if she thinks that creature in her bedroom could have been a person.”

“Yes,” Jupiter remembered. “There’s someone else we’ve ignored so far—the mysterious stranger you heard coughing, Pete.”

“Pico’s accomplice,” Bob noted. “If it was Pico in the costume. Definitely someone who was waiting for the perpetrator. Maybe it was Carter.”

“Carter? What makes you think of that?” Jupe wondered.

“Carter and Pico are in business together. When Pico is discovered by Mrs Berger in his monster costume, he has to flee without the loot. He runs to the getaway car with Carter at the wheel, and they return to the circus. There they get into a fight because the break-in didn’t work, and Pico beats up Carter.”

Jupiter pulled a wry face. “A very daring thesis.”

“But that’s all we have,” Bob surmised.

“True. And that’s why we should make sure that the evidence is finally put on the table.”

“So what are you up to?” Pete asked.

“We need to tail Pico. And we need to finally talk to Carter and ask him who hit him.”

“Or what,” Pete interjected.

Jupiter looked at his watch. “Visiting hours at the hospital will soon be over, but if I hurry, I can still make it. You’ll go back to the circus and watch our mysterious clown without attracting attention.”

“Without attracting attention?” Pete asked. “How are we gonna do that? He lives in a caravan in the middle of a field. It’s not a very good place to lurk.”

“Think of something! But don’t get caught!”

“Good evening. I’m here to see Mr Carter.” Jupiter smiled kindly at the lady in the lobby of the hospital.

She typed something into the computer. "Ward C, Room 311. But you only have ten minutes left before visiting hours end."

Jupiter nodded and made his way to Ward C. He hated hospitals. There was a smell of disinfectant everywhere, the grey-faced patients shuffled slowly through the corridors, the nursing staff was constantly in a hurry. Jupiter wondered how one could get well in such an environment.

He was about to open the door to Room 311 when a forceful voice behind him asked, "Where are you going?"

Jupiter turned around. A nurse with a stern look stood before him. "To see Mr Carter."

"Are you a relative?"

"No, I—"

"Then you can't go in there," she said.

"But I—"

"There are no exceptions."

Jupiter sighed. "Can you tell me how he is?"

"He has a severe concussion and is not yet conscious."

"When do you think he—"

"Maybe tomorrow."

"Then can I visit him?"

She gave a narrow nod. Jupiter waited to see if she would go on, but she seemed to be waiting for him to disappear. He shrugged his shoulders, turned around and walked towards the exit.

At the end of the corridor, he turned around again. The nurse had disappeared. Should he turn back? He thought about it for a moment, but then decided against it. What was the point if Carter was still unconscious?

He was just about to leave when suddenly the door to Room 311 opened. A man in a light grey trench coat came out, looked around once and then walked towards him.

Jupiter was sure he had seen the man before, but at the moment, he had no idea when and where it had been. The First Investigator quickly turned around and looked with apparent interest at a plan hanging on the wall, on which the emergency exits were marked. The man in the trench coat passed him and hurried down the stairs. Jupiter followed him at a distance behind. The man quickly left the hospital and walked to the parking lot.

If he now got into a car, Jupiter had no way of tailing him. Feverishly, the First Investigator thought about how he could save the situation. The

unknown man approached a dark blue Porsche and was obviously looking for the key in his coat pockets. Jupiter took a step forward. As the man got in and slammed the door shut, Jupiter reached the car. The First Investigator knocked at the window. “Excuse me!”

The man lowered the window. “Yes?”

“Excuse me, but are you a friend of Mr Carter’s?”

“Excuse me?”

“I just saw you coming out of his room.”

He frowned and sparkled at Jupiter angrily. “You must have me confused with someone else.”

“No, you were in Room 311, just now, and—”

“Get out of here, boy!” The stranger started the car, put it in gear and drove off with squealing tyres. A moment later, he was gone.

14. Unrest

“So?” Jupiter asked curiously when they met at Headquarters late in the evening. He had been waiting for Bob and Pete for hours and had the quiet hope that they had had more success than he had.

“A complete waste of time,” Pete moaned angrily. “Our so-called tailing has accomplished nothing at all. Only ten spectators turned up so the show had to be cancelled. Anyway, it was also due to Carter’s absence. The circus people had probably just held a war council on how to proceed, and the mood was correspondingly depressed. Pico sat in his caravan all evening, and never showed up. At ten o’clock, the lights went out at his place. We sat outside in the meadow and talked to Copper and Lilly, but nothing new came up either.”

“Yes,” Bob objected. “We saw the monster costume. Pete was desperate for proof of its existence, so Mr Copper showed it to us. It was inside a box at a dark corner in the animal tent. If we’d ever had a chance to look around, we would have spotted it much earlier.”

“Well, then all doubts are eliminated,” Jupiter noted with satisfaction. “Nothing else?”

“No,” grumbled Pete. “Except that, together with Lilly, we came up with a plan to help the circus. She will be walking through Rocky Beach tomorrow with Pico and Hannibal and performing some stunts. “Everyone hopes that Carter will be released in a few days and then the show can continue.”

“But that will only work if there’s not some horror story in the paper tomorrow about an escaped monster,” Bob added. “We have advised Mr Copper to clarify the empty cage thing, but he does not want to reveal the secret of his non-existent monster under any circumstances. Well, that’s what he wants.”

Jupiter pulled a disappointed face. “I was actually hoping you could find out more. But if that’s all there was to it...”

“Well, there was this car,” Pete remembered.

Jupiter’s ears were wide open. “What kind of car?”

“Bob thinks he saw someone on the other side of Coffman’s Meadow watching the circus from his car.”

“I don’t just mean that, that was so!” Pete affirmed. “He stood there for at least an hour. It was a blue sports car, but I couldn’t make out the man behind the wheel.”

“Was it by any chance a dark blue Porsche?”

“Yes, exactly. How did you know that?”

Jupiter told them about his encounter with the man in the trench coat at the hospital. “At first I didn’t know exactly how I knew him, but now, it occurred to me. I saw him last night when we were standing in the meadow with Mr Copper. He looked over at us from the street and then he walked on. I’m quite sure he had something to do with all these incidents.”

“Maybe he was the one who coughed last night,” Pete pondered.
“Pico’s accomplice.”

“Could be. We’ll ask Lilly tomorrow, she might know who he is.”
Pete nodded and yawned. “Okay, I’m done for today. Done. No longer capable of anything.”

The yawn was infectious. Five minutes later, Bob and Pete said goodbye and cycled home. Jupiter left Headquarters and went straight to bed. He was dead tired and fell into a fitful sleep.

Half the night, he was plagued by wild dreams in which he was chased through a huge circus ring by blood-thirsty monsters. When the alarm clock rudely woke him up the next morning, the dream images did not let him go. He was haunted by a foreboding that something would soon happen.

“It’s a catastrophe,” shouted Bob as he stormed into Headquarters and slammed the new issue of *Rocky Beach Today* on the desk.

‘Circus Monster Escaped!’—the paper reported in huge letters. “Half the city is talking about it! Parents are picking up their children from school in person because they’re afraid they might be eaten by the evil Dunnerak on the way home! And outside the supermarket, two men were talking about starting a citizens group.”

“And what’s the point?” Pete asked.

“I don’t know,” Bob said. “Probably they want to sue the circus or go through the city armed with pitchforks to hunt down the beast. I can just see them marching through the streets shouting: ‘Kill the monster!’ What

is this? The Middle Ages? They don't really believe the monster is real, do they?"

"We believed that at first," Jupiter reminded him. "I think most readers will expose this article for what it is—a smear campaign against Trinket Circus. But surely there are some incorrigibles who take everything in the paper at face value."

"I wonder if Lilly and Pico's publicity stunt can still work against this," Pete wondered.

A piercing scream echoed across the salvage yard. The Three Investigators flinched in horror.

"That was Aunt Mathilda!" cried Jupiter, jumped up and opened the door to the outside. His aunt stood behind a pile of scrap metal as if rooted to the ground and looked at the entrance with her eyes wide open. A huge gorilla squatted there, looked around curiously and held on to the leg of a blonde girl.

"Don't worry, he won't do anything!" cried Lilly.

"Hello, Lilly," Pete shouted. The Three Investigators stormed out of Headquarters and ran towards the young artist.

"Jupe! Be careful!" Aunt Mathilda warned.

"Don't worry, Aunt Mathilda! It's just Hannibal!" Jupe said.

"Who?" Aunt Mathilda dared to come out of hiding.

"Hannibal! Come here, and I'll introduce you!" Together they approached the gorilla and Lilly.

Aunt Mathilda still very hesitant, but the three friends were without a trace of fear.

"Well, how's it going?" Pete asked. "Haven't you read the papers yet?"

"Yes, I did," Lilly said.

"Well, then you know how it goes. Usually people are very curious and come up to us to pet Hannibal or give him something to eat. But it was different today. People were keeping away from the two of us when we walked down the street. It's like running the gauntlet. I could have saved myself the whole thing. Pico was so smart. He had a hunch and stayed at the circus. I'm gonna finish this thing too, but I wanted to stop by and see you guys first."

Hannibal started prancing around and pulling restlessly on Lilly's leg.

"I'm sorry things aren't going well with the publicity stunt," Bob said. "What are you going to do now?"

Lilly shrugged resignedly with her shoulders. “I don’t know. The tents will be taken down as soon as Carter is released from the hospital. And then we’ll try our luck in another town. If that doesn’t work, we might close down completely.”

“In the meantime, we have a new lead,” said Jupiter. “You might be able to help us. It’s about a man I saw outside Coffman’s Meadow two days ago. He was with Carter at the hospital yesterday and then he turned up at the circus last night. The guy wears a light grey trench coat and drives a blue Porsche. Do you happen to know him?”

Lilly frowned and then shook her head slowly. “Not that I know of. Who’s that supposed to be?”

“We’d like to know that, too,” Jupe said. “The thief possibly. Or his accomplice. I thought you might have noticed him before.”

“No, unfortunately.”

Disappointed, Jupiter let his shoulders droop. They simply had no luck.

Aunt Mathilda, who had previously stood at a safe distance and watched Hannibal, now came a little closer.

She never took her eyes off the gorilla. “He seems really nice,” she said. “Can I pet him?”

Lilly smiled. “Of course. But you shouldn’t stare at him like that. If you look gorillas straight in the eyes for too long, they feel threatened and challenged, which is why they were long considered extremely aggressive. For humans, eye contact is a sign of sympathy, for gorillas it is the exact opposite. Just look somewhere else from time to time, then—”

Just as Aunt Mathilda reached out to Hannibal, the gorilla jumped forward, roared and stood up menacingly. Mathilda Jones gasped and took three steps backwards, but Lilly was also shocked.

“Easy, easy, Hannibal! What’s the matter with you?” The gorilla snorted angrily, then settled back down on all fours and walked up and down impatiently.

“He doesn’t seem quite so nice after all,” stammered Aunt Mathilda.

“Sorry, he’s not usually like this. But today... I don’t know, he’s been so nervous all day.”

“No wonder,” Bob thought. “After all, you’re walking with him through a town where everybody changes sides when they see you.”

She beckoned. “Oh, he won’t even notice. Besides, nothing usually upsets him that fast. No, it’s something else. Gorillas are very sensitive

animals. I think he misses Carter. And he senses that something is wrong. Something is very wrong.”

15. The Circus Grounds are Deserted

“We’re going to meet Alois in a minute,” said Uncle Titus at dinner. “With all the trouble he’s having with the circus, we haven’t had a chance to really talk.”

“We thought we’d invite him to a nice wine bar,” added Aunt Mathilda. “Then he can relax and unwind from his worries.”

Jupiter nodded and said through a bite of omelette: “Have fun!”

After helping them with the dishes, Aunt Mathilda and Uncle Titus left the house together to go to the city. And Jupiter went over the dark salvage yard to Headquarters to meet Pete and Bob. When he opened the door to the trailer, the phone rang.

“The Three Investigators. Jupiter Jones speaking.”

“Hi, this is Lilly. It was good that you gave me your card, or I wouldn’t have called you at all.”

“What’s up?”

“You won’t believe it. The trench-coat man was here today.”

“What?”

“Yeah. I was just coming back from my trip through Rocky Beach with Hannibal when he pulled up next to me in his Porsche and rolled down the windscreen. It was Mr Stewart!”

“Who is Mr Stewart?”

“A friend of Carter’s. That means... I don’t know if they’re really friends. But they know each other. He’s been to the circus a few times to visit him. He’s the one Carter bought the roller coaster from. When you described him to me this afternoon, I couldn’t think of anyone else. But when that blue Porsche pulled up beside me, I knew who you meant. I just didn’t think of it because he got a new car. I think he has a different car every time.”

“Interesting,” muttered Jupiter. “What did he want from you?”

“He asked me if Carter has woken up.”

“Well? Has he?”

“This afternoon he has not. But I just called the hospital. He’s awake now. He’s all right.” Lilly paused. In the background, excited shouts could

be heard.

“What’s all the yelling about?”

“I don’t know,” Lilly murmured worriedly.

“Where are you?”

“In my caravan. I am calling from my mobile phone. Something’s going on out there. Pico is running around, and, oh, my goodness!”

“What?”

“Something’s happened. I have to hang up, Jupiter. I’ll call you later.”

Even before Jupiter could reply, the connection was already cut off. Distraught, he looked at the telephone receiver.

What happened there? He looked at his watch. Bob and Pete were supposed to come in an hour. If he hurried, he could be back by then. Jupiter hurriedly scribbled a message on a piece of paper, left Headquarters and swung himself onto his bicycle.

It wasn’t far to the circus. But Jupiter noticed that the streets were unusually empty for that time of day. Hardly any pedestrians were out. He wondered if this was connected with the horror story in the newspaper. When he reached Coffman’s Meadow, the circus grounds were dark, too.

Jupiter was startled. Yesterday there were lights behind the windows of several caravans. He knew Mr Copper was at a wine bar with his uncle and aunt. But where were the others?

Reluctantly, Jupiter entered the caravan circle. No one could be seen, nothing could be heard. But ten minutes ago, he was speaking to Lilly!

“Hello?” he shouted. No one answered. Jupiter went to the circus tent and stuck his head through a gap in the tarpaulin. Everything was dark. Then he took a look inside the animal tent. No light was there either. He only heard the soft snorting of the horses. A bad feeling crept over him. A little nervously, Jupiter turned around and knocked on every door of the caravans. Nothing.

There was no doubt—the circus grounds were deserted.

“Hello? Nobody here?” Pete wondered as he and Bob entered Headquarters. “There’s no light on in the house either. The Jones family seems to have flown the coop.”

“There’s a note on the desk,” Bob said. “It says: ‘I’m at the circus, but I’ll be right back. J.’ I see. What’s he doing there?”

“Perhaps he had one of his famous brainstorms,” Pete surmised. “He’ll let us know.” The Second Investigator opened the small refrigerator that

Jupiter had once found at the salvage yard, repaired and taken to their headquarters. "Oh, man, why is there nothing left to drink?"

"Because once again no one felt responsible for getting the supplies," Bob replied.

"I'm monster thirsty!" Pete looked through the little window over to the house. "I wonder if we can get something from the fridge at the salvage yard office."

Bob pulled a face. "I don't know."

"I think Jupe does it all the time." Pete remarked.

"Of course he does. This is his place."

"This is pretty much our place as well. I'm sure nobody would mind. I'm dying of thirst."

Pete reached into a flower pot in which a neglected green plant—now more brown than green—had been vegetating for months. This was Jupe's hiding place for the office key. "Come on, let's just get a bottle of water."

"All right." They left Headquarters and went to the salvage yard office. There was no one there. The radio at the counter, which Aunt Mathilda must have forgotten to turn off, played quietly.

"Hmm!" Pete did. "I wonder if there's any food in the fridge."

"Give me a break! You just wanted to some water!"

"I'm just kidding." Pete opened the fridge and got a bottle of water. He was about to leave the office when Bob held him back.

"Wait a minute!" He turned up the radio.

A well-known host of *L.A. Flash* radio show has just announced: "What seemed like a sensational headline this morning about the escape of a circus monster was more than just a publicity stunt for *Rocky Beach Today*. I just heard that the monster was seen in the small coastal town! So, dear citizens of Rocky Beach, stay at home if you don't want to end up as monster food!" His tone of voice made it clear that he thought the story was a bad joke. "And now, back to the new single from Tori Amos."

Bob turned off the radio and stared at Pete. "Am I crazy?"

"Then we're both crazy," Pete remarked.

"You gotta be kidding me."

"I hope so," Pete said.

"Probably just a bunch of jerks who thought it was funny to call the station and say they saw the monster," Bob surmised.

"Right." Still, Pete looked out the window into the darkness with alarm. It wasn't the first time in recent days that he remembered Madame

Yasemin's warning. But whatever might be lurking outside, they should be safe in the salvage yard as it was surrounded by a high fence.

Suddenly there was a loud rumbling outside. Pete turned his eyes. Was he wrong or was the trailer shaking slightly? The sound repeated itself and now Pete thought he saw some movement behind the door of the trailer that they had left open. "Is that Jupe?"

"Sure. Come on, let's tell him what we just heard!" They left the office, locked the door and stepped out into the darkness of the salvage yard. A loud clang made them drive together. A rumble followed, then wood splintered and something heavy fell down.

"There's somebody at Headquarters!" Bob shouted and immediately started to move.

"Bob! Stay here!"

"But—"

"That is certainly not Jupe!" Pete exclaimed. "It... it could... oh, my goodness, it stopped! It heard us!"

"It? What are you talking about, Pete? There's a burglar raiding our headquarters! And we're gonna get that guy now!" Bob broke free and ran towards the trailer.

Suddenly, a huge figure came out of the trailer. It was dark and they could only see the silhouette. Then the figure gave out a deafening roar.

It was Dunnerak!

16. The Monster Goes on a Rampage!

Jupiter stood underhandedly on the meadow and looked around. This was a unique opportunity to look around undisturbed—and to go where he would otherwise not go.

He went to Pico's trailer and grabbed the doorknob. Too bad Pete wasn't here. He could have picked that simple lock with his lock picks in seconds without any trouble. But to Jupiter's surprise, the door was unlocked and it opened with a soft creak.

"The departure must have been very sudden, if he didn't even lock his door," Jupiter thought to himself and entered the caravan. It was dark and cramped inside. He didn't dare to turn on the light, as someone could see him from the street. He left the door open, so that a little moonlight fell in.

It was just an ordinary caravan. A narrow bed, a tiny kitchen, a tiny bathroom, a little desk. Here and there a few books and CDs, a mini stereo, some pictures on the wall. What did he expect?

Jupiter took a look at the papers on the desk—personal letters, bills, bank statements—Pico was in debt. Either he had a high standard of living or the circus was in even worse shape than Jupiter had thought—so bad that Mr Copper could no longer pay his people.

Jupiter pulled open the desk drawer, looked under the bed and leafed through books. Apart from a box full of colourful balls and clubs for juggling, he discovered nothing suspicious. Pico's caravan was absolutely clean. If the clown was hiding a secret, it wasn't here.

Disappointed, the First Investigator left the caravan and turned to the next one which was Carter's. Again, the door was unlocked. Carter probably had the key with him when he was knocked down. The trainer's caravan was a little larger, but the interior looked similar, except that everything was much messier. That made it more interesting on the one hand, but also made it more difficult to find anything.

Jupiter found something in the bathroom. When he opened the small mirror cabinet, he saw a shaving kit, hair shampoo and a number of medications—painkillers, cough syrup, flu pills—and half a dozen pill tubes. Jupiter took one of them out and read the label: 'Novril Insodon—

mood-enhancing psychotropic drug'. He didn't know much about drugs, but he knew that these kinds of drugs were prescribed for mental disorders or depression and that they improved the general mental state.

Recently he had read an article with the headline 'Addiction on Prescription Drugs'. It was about the abuse of psychotropic drugs. There were drugs that made the patient dependent if they were taken too often or for too long. The amount of Novril Insodon alone made Jupiter sceptical. Was Carter addicted to drugs? And if so, did that have anything to do with their case?

Jupiter closed the cabinet with a queasy feeling in his stomach. He had just, without meaning to, invaded Carter's privacy a good deal too far. It was best for him to leave the caravan as quickly as possible before he found out more about what he didn't want to know.

He was just on his way out when his gaze caught a small box sticking out from under a corner of the bedspread. Jupiter paused and wrestled with himself. Finally, his curiosity prevailed. One last look wouldn't make things worse. He bent down, took out the box and opened it.

"Bull's eye!"

In the box was a chain. Jupiter was wondering whether to take the evidence or leave it here, when a faint creaking startled him.

He turned around and looked into the dark face of a man who had just entered the trailer. The stranger pounced on him, grabbed Jupiter's arm with an iron grip and held his hand in front of his mouth.

"No you don't, boy! That's mine!"

"The monster!" Pete cried and stopped dead in his tracks.

Bob made a U-turn and wanted to run back to the office, but when he reached a stunned Pete, the black figure already ran around them roaring and blocked their way to the office. Despite the darkness, they could see the long dark fur that stood off bristly on all sides and the sharp claws that tore deep furrows into the sand. It was Dunnerak alright. Then it rose threateningly upright and growled.

"Oh, my goodness," Pete gasped.

Bob grabbed him by the shoulder. "What are you standing there for! Go into Headquarters!"

Finally Pete's legs moved again. He spun around and ran after Bob. At once, the monster started chasing them with giant leaps. Bob got into the

trailer first. Pete jumped through the door, caught his foot and fell. In panic, he turned around and saw the black monster racing towards him.

Just in time, Bob dragged him into Headquarters and threw the door shut. Dunnerak jumped against it with such force that the trailer shook. The door buckled slightly. Small splinters of wood flew out of the hinges. Bob quickly pushed the latch forward from the inside. Then it was quiet.

With eyes wide open and breath gasping, they squatted in the dark trailer and waited. They dared not switch the light on as it might just attract the monster.

Then came the second attack. The monster slammed the door, which trembled menacingly. With a cracking sound that hurt their ears, the wood splintered into a long crack.

Pete cried out. "It's trying to come in! Bob! The door won't hold! It's coming in!"

"Shut up, Pete! Or do you want to make it even wilder with your screaming?"

"Even wilder?" He picked himself up, pressed himself against the opposite wall as far as he could and stared at the door.

"There's a monster out there, Bob! A monster that doesn't even exist!"

Dunnerak kept ramming the door. Three or four more blows and the door would either rip out of its hinges or simply break! Pete reached for a pair of scissors on the desk. A measly weapon against this beast, but better than nothing. Breathlessly, he waited for the last decisive attack.

It did not come. Suddenly everything was quiet.

"It... it stopped," Pete whispered. "Do you think it's gone?"

They were listening. At first, it remained silent, but then they heard the heavy breathing and the feet of the creature scratching on the sandy ground as it circled the trailer.

"It's not gone," Bob whispered. "It's just looking for another way in." Bob quickly drew the curtains everywhere. "Maybe it will forget that we are in here. After all, it's just... an animal."

"An animal?" Pete left his guard up against the wall and found a place, if possible, in the middle of Headquarters. The next attack could come from any direction. "It's not an animal! But it's not human either! Copper has fooled us! A clown in costume, my foot! He told us this story to hide the horrible truth. The monster really exists! And he escaped! Carter was only the first victim. The people on the radio were right. It's been roaming Rocky Beach since yesterday. And now... now it's here!"

Bob couldn't say anything back. Pete was right. Whatever was out there, it wasn't a man. His gaze fell on the almost destroyed door. No human could have done such a thing. "We've got to get help," he said soundlessly, reaching for the phone. He dialled the police number.

Only then did he notice that there was no dial tone at all. The line was dead. "What... what... why is the phone not working? Turn on the light, Pete."

"But then it will see us!"

"The curtains are drawn."

Pete fumbled for the desk lamp, but did not find it. "The lamp is gone. Wait, I have a lighter!" He lit it and held up the little flame. "Oh, my goodness!"

Headquarters was completely devastated. Dunnerak had smashed everything to bits in its rampage when it was in there earlier. The computer monitor lay on the floor, almost everything on the desk had been destroyed. The filing cabinet and the chairs had fallen over. Even the lamp was broken.

"My goodness!" Pete repeated. "It's... it's all ruined!"

"It ripped the phone cord out of the wall!" Bob grunted. "We can't get help!"

As if to provide malicious confirmation, the monster growled outside.

Pete turned white as a sheet and said what Bob had not dared to say: "We are trapped in here! And sooner or later, Dunnerak will come in!"

17. Jupiter Gets Some Answers

Jupiter tried to defend himself but the man's grip was so tight that he could not move. Finally the stranger took his hand from his mouth. Now the First Investigator could turn his head and look into his face.

Mr Stewart!

His opponent narrowed his eyes. "You're the boy from the hospital! Who are you?"

"A friend of Carter's," stammered Jupiter. "And... and you?" He knew the answer. But he didn't have to tell the other person that. Now it was tactically clever to play the underexposed fool—a role that Jupiter had mastered perfectly. "Who are you?"

"It's none of your business! What are you doing in Carter's trailer?"

"I... I was just looking for a book that I lent him," Jupiter affirmed so incredibly that even the dumbest had to recognize the lie.

"Don't talk nonsense! You came for the necklace!"

"No, really, I just happen to have them—"

"Give me that!" Stewart let him go and took the jewellery from him. "I guess you're his accomplice, huh? I knew he'd double-cross me, the dog! He told me he didn't get anything. Is there any more hidden around here?"

Jupiter shook his head.

Stewart stared at him grimly. "Are you sure?"

"Yes!"

"All right." Grinning contentedly, he let the chain slip through his fingers. "This will be enough for a down payment."

Stewart held the chain up so the gold and stones would shimmer in the moonlight. Jupiter considered whether he should take the opportunity to flee, but his chances were slim. Stewart looked fit and sporty and would probably catch up with him within a few metres. Besides, Jupiter had to take the opportunity to finally find out what was going on here.

Suddenly Stewart stopped and held the jewellery close to his eyes. His face darkened. "This is not real."

"What?"

“I said this is not real!” Stewart tapped on a tiny embossing stamp on the clasp. “Made in Taiwan.” Angrily, he turned to Jupiter. “Where is the real necklace?”

“The real one? I don’t know what you mean!”

He immediately grabbed and turned Jupiter’s arms on his back and pulled them up until the First Investigator groaned in pain. “No games, boy! I want the loot! And I want it now!”

And suddenly Jupiter had a flash of inspiration. “All right!” he gasped. “I... I’ll show you!”

“I can’t connect back the phone,” Bob whispered desperately. “I need tools! And they’re out in the workshop!” Meanwhile, Pete had found a candle. Bob sat on the floor in its flickering glow and tried to plug in the phone. ...but it was hopeless without a screwdriver.

Dunnerak had been quiet for the last few minutes, but neither of them believed the monster had gone. It was lurking out there somewhere, waiting for them to come out.

“But we must get help,” Pete urged. “Not just because of us. Jupe could come back at any moment. Or his uncle and aunt. If they enter the salvage yard unsuspectingly, Dunnerak will make mincemeat of them! We... we gotta distract the monster and get outta here!”

Bob rose with difficulty and looked around helplessly in the trailer. “How?”

“I don’t have—” A clang made Pete turn around. One of the little windows was broken. A clawed, furry hand reached past the curtain and tried to grab anything. Dunnerak gave a blood-curdling roar.

Pete and Bob flinched in horror.

“It’s coming in!” yelled Pete. “Where are the scissors? Where are—”

Bob reached for the candle, jumped to the window and scorched Dunnerak’s fur. The beast cried out and immediately pulled back the claw. Raging with rage and pain, the monster threw itself against the trailer, which trembled and wobbled like an earthquake.

“We have to get out of here! We gotta get out of here.” Bob thought feverishly. They needed an exit, a second exit! “I’ve got it,” he suddenly said.

“What?” Pete asked.

“I know how to get out of here.”

“And how?”

“It’s not entirely safe.”

“Come on!”

Bob pointed to the floor. “Tunnel Two.”

The animal tent was pitch dark. Since neither Jupiter nor Stewart had a flashlight, the pale moonlight that fell through the entrance had to be enough. That was Jupiter’s only advantage.

“So this is where he hid the loot,” Stewart murmured. “Not stupid at all. This is the last place I would look.” He smiled viciously. “But that’s why I have you.”

“If I give you the jewels, will you let me go?” Jupiter asked.

“Why, sure, boy. I just want what’s mine, then I’m out of here. So where are the jewels?”

“Over there.” Jupiter pointed to the cage with the black cloth.

“The monster cage? Very clever of Carter. He knew all the circus people were very careful not to let anyone get too close to that cage.”

“The jewels are in a black box. I’ll get it.”

“But no tricks!” warned Stewart.

Jupiter opened the squeaking door and climbed into the cage lined with straw. Sliding around on all fours, he rummaged through it. Finally his fingers felt a small, black box. He wedged it under his arm and crawled out again.

“Give me that!” Stewart demanded and tried to rip the container from his hand. But Jupiter jumped to the side.

“Hold on! You can’t open that thing so easily! It has a very complicated lock, but Carter showed me how.”

“Then open it!”

“I’m on it!” Jupiter fiddled around with the box and concentrated on biting his lower lip.

And he was going in circles. When he finally got Stewart where he wanted him—between him and the open cage door, he said: “I’ve got it!” He turned up the volume knob on the recorder all the way up and pressed the play button.

A deafening monster roar echoed from the loudspeaker. Stewart let out a little scream. He staggered back half a step and stumbled over the threshold of the cage. Jupiter swung out and gave him a well-aimed kick so that Stewart fell backwards into the cage. Quick as lightning, the First

Investigator threw the door shut, turned the key around and pulled it out of the lock.

Stewart stared at him in surprise. “What... what is this?”

“What does it look like?” Jupiter asked gloatingly and immediately dropped the whiny tone of an idiot.

“Let me out now!”

The First Investigator shook his head regretfully. “Has anyone ever told you that you’re incredibly stupid, Mr Stewart?” He turned off the recorder and put it on the floor. “So now we’ve turned the tables on you.”

“Let me out!” yelled Stewart, not impressing Jupiter in the least. He let him rave for a while longer. At some point Stewart realized that he had no chance and calmed down.

“How about answering a few questions?” Jupiter suggested.

“You’d like that!”

“You’ll have to answer them anyway when the police show up.”

“The police? They can’t do anything to me,” sneered Stewart. “I have committed no crime!”

“You beat up Carter,” the First Investigator suspected. “Because he owed you money and came back without the loot, right?”

“How do you know all this?” Stewart asked in a gravedigger’s voice.

“It’s not important right now. I just want to test my theory. Carter bought the roller coaster from you without paying for it. Since the circus was in dire straits, he never got enough pay from Copper and he owed you the money for some time.”

“Fourteen months,” Stewart corrected him, grinning in agony. “And I have heard the tragic story of the poor circus dozens of times. I’m getting tired of it! I want my money!”

“So you persuaded Carter to break the law and steal valuable jewellery. But Carter was afraid of getting caught. So he put on his colleague Pico’s monster costume and drove you to Mrs Berger’s house. As an artist, it was no problem for him to climb up to her balcony. She caught him promptly, but it didn’t matter, because all she saw was Dunnerak, the beast from the forests of Alaska. And, of course, nobody believed her.

“Carter had to escape before he could steal her jewels. He ran to the getaway car where you were waiting for him. Then you went back to the circus together. But you didn’t believe him, that he hadn’t taken anything and you struck him down.”

Stewart looked at him confused. “What are you talking about, boy? Did he tell you that?”

Jupiter shook his head. “No. That was just what logic dictated to me.”

“I waited for him here the night before last to pick up the jewels.

When he came back empty-handed, I had to teach him a lesson, so that he knows that I won’t be fooled any further. I admit the blow on the head was a bit violent. But in the future, he will be careful not to make me wait again. But the rest of your story is pure nonsense! Carter an artist? Don’t make me laugh. He may be good with animals, but I don’t think he can climb a tree!”

Jupiter frowned. “But how did he get into the house?”

Stewart laughed hard. “Not at all! He did not commit the break-in! He left that to the monster!”

“The monster?”

“Of course. Didn’t you read about it in the papers? Now the creature has escaped!”

“But this is complete nonsense! There is no monster.”

“Yes, there is. And Carter trained it to steal the jewels for him. As a reward, there were little pick-me-ups.” He gloated. “He pumped the creature so full of it, it is probably addicted to it by now. Not a bad idea, though, because that way Carter could be sure it’s ready for its next dose.”

“The Novril Insodon!” cried Jupiter.

“Don’t know what that stuff is called.”

It dawned on Jupiter. At first very slowly and hesitantly. Novril Insodon—a psychotropic drug that made one addicted.

But a monster who steals jewellery? And then Jupiter lit up a whole string of lights!

“How did he train the monster?” Jupiter asked.

“What do you think?”

“How did he get it to steal jewellery and nothing else?”

“Well, that’s easy. He taught him that it should take everything that is small, shiny and glittering,” Stewart explained. “At least, that’s what he told me.”

Suddenly Jupiter made the connection—small, shiny and glittering—the mayor’s wife’s jewellery, Pete’s crystal, and... and when Aunt Mathilda tried to pat the gorilla, she was wearing rings on her fingers!

Then Jupiter heard an engine noise approaching. He looked outside and saw a van coming into Coffman’s Meadow. Without paying any

further attention to Stewart, the First Investigator ran outside and got in the way of the truck. The headlights caught him and the truck slowed down. Pico and Lilly jumped out.

“Jupiter!” cried Lilly. “Goodness, I’d forgotten all about you! Is he here?”

“Who is supposed to be here? Mr Stewart?” He had a big grin. “As it happens, yes.”

“No, not Mr Stewart. Hannibal!” Lilly shouted.

“Why? Isn’t he in his cage?”

“This is a disaster,” Lilly said angrily. “He escaped! We just drove all over Rocky Beach to find him, but he disappeared! We thought maybe he came back on his own. He’s been so restless all day! I hope he doesn’t hurt anybody else it will be all over!”

“Hannibal has escaped,” Jupiter said soundlessly and kneaded his lower lip. Suddenly his face lit up. “But of course! He wants to collect his reward, which he hasn’t received in two days. He can’t do that sitting in his cage.”

“What are you babbling about, boy?” Pico yapped at him.

“This is not nonsense!” Jupiter insisted. “Hannibal is keen on anything that glitters and looks precious. I think I know where he is!”

Bob uncovered the floor hatch that led to the tunnel and opened it. “Oh, no!” he moaned. “Tunnel Two is still full of our old files! I thought Jupe would have relocated them by now!”

“I thought you were responsible for it,” Pete said.

Bob rolled his eyes. “Never mind now, give me a hand. We don’t have much time, or Dunnerak will smash our headquarters to bits before we can put our plan into action.”

In the dim light of a candle, they quickly pulled up the huge mountain of files that blocked the tunnel and carelessly threw the files into the nearest corner. Then Bob took a deep breath. “You ready?”

Pete nodded. “As ready as I’ll ever be. Let’s do it!”

“All right. Remember, it’s gotta be fast!”

“You don’t have to tell me that!”

“Good. Wait for my signal. Bob jumped into Tunnel Two, crouched down and crawled through the corrugated-iron tunnel lined with carpets. At its end was a grate, behind which was the open-air workshop. Bob grabbed it, turned his head and called back through the tunnel: “Now!”

Pete pulled the latch from the door and pushed it open. “Hey, monster!” he yelled as loud as he could. “Over here!” He heard Dunnerak puffed.

Not a second too soon, he sensed that the beast was at the doorway. Without looking back, Pete jumped into the tunnel as fast as he could. In the next second, he heard the monster entering the trailer, raging and growling angrily.

Meanwhile Bob ran from the workshop back to the trailer. He took a brief look into it and saw the back of Dunnerak, who was squatting at the tunnel opening, desperately trying to push his massive body through the narrow tunnel. They were right—the monster was too big to go into the tunnel.

Bob did not hesitate for a second longer and slammed the trailer door shut before the monster turned round. A moment later, he padlocked the door.

By that time, Pete had got out of the tunnel at the workshop and ran to join Bob.

“We did it!” Bob cried with relief as Pete stumbled towards him. “It’s trapped!”

“Now get over to the office! We can call the police from there!”

They had just come halfway when a bursting noise made them turn around. The monster had knocked the door off its hinges! “Oh, no!”

It was still so dark at the salvage yard, but they could see the massive silhouette jump out and race towards them. Without looking at it, Bob and Pete sprinted off. Dunnerak’s roar came closer and closer. They dashed up the stairs to the office and Pete struggled to get the key out of his pocket.

As soon as he got the key out, he shouted: “I dropped the key!” It felt as if the ground had been torn from under his feet. It was dark at the office door, and they knew there was no way they could see the dropped key. They had no choice but to turn around and stare at the silhouette of the monster approaching.

Suddenly they saw several flashlights shining in their direction, and then heard a shot. Dunnerak cried out, ran another two or three steps and finally staggered. The monster groaned and collapsed. It lay motionless in the dusty salvage yard.

Bob and Pete huddled panting against the wall of the office building and stared at the massive body of the beast. It was only when someone called out their names that their gaze was released.

Three people with flashlights came running towards the office through the darkness. One of them carried a rifle. Another one they recognized from afar by his bulky stature.

“Jupe! The... the monster...” Pete gasped.

“It’s not Dunnerak,” said Jupiter reassuringly and approached the motionless body.

Lilly came running over and leaned over the beast. “Is he okay?”

“Better than the last two days,” replied Jupiter. “He’s sleeping blissfully. Good thing you brought a tranquillizer gun, Pico.”

“Not the monster?” Pete asked in a trembling voice.

The First Investigator shook his head and shone his flashlight at the beast.

“It’s Hannibal!”

18. A New Circus Act

Two days later, the salvage yard was filled with noise from hammers and knocks. The Three Investigators and Lilly repaired the trailer—or what was left of it. While Jupiter took care of the interior, Bob and Pete installed a new door. Lilly was just putting the window glass in the frame.

Again and again they marvelled at the traces of the devastation the gorilla had left behind.

“I still get a shiver down my spine when I see these scratches and dents in the wall,” Pete confessed. “When I imagine that this could have been my body... Brrr!”

“I’m so very sorry,” Lilly reaffirmed. “I never thought Hannibal could become so aggressive!”

“It’s not your fault,” said Jupiter. “The only one who has to answer for this is Carter. To train that gorilla to steal all that glitters and shines is pretty intense. But feeding him happy pills as a reward is cruelty to animals.”

“I’m still not quite sure I understood the story completely,” Pete said. “Let me see if I can get this straight. Carter owed Mr Stewart money for the roller coaster.”

Lilly nodded. “No one knew that Carter has not fully paid for the roller coaster. He never said a word about it. Also, Copper wasn’t paying us nearly enough. There was barely enough for food and the costumes, but we all put up with it. After all, we knew how bad things were at the circus. We just thought that better times were coming.

“To get money, Carter trained Hannibal to steal jewels. Of course a gorilla cannot distinguish between real and fake gems, so he’s into anything that glitters. Because Carter gave him a great reward for that, and he got hooked, little by little. Carter trained Hannibal to wait until after dark before going on the prowl.”

“But then at the first night’s performance, the power went out because the generator was broken,” Bob continued. “Hannibal, who was waiting behind the curtain before the grand finale of the show, thought that that was his signal. He raced through the ring to grab the necklace from the

mayor's wife. We now suspect that when Hannibal shook hands with the mayor's wife earlier, that was when he saw her jewellery—or rather fake jewellery."

"Unfortunately, it was worthless," Jupiter added. "So the gorilla had to go at it again the very next night. Carter waited until we left, put Hannibal in the van and drove him to Mrs Berger's house. He puts a similar Dunnerak mask on Hannibal before setting him off. Pete, that was Hannibal with the Dunnerak mask that ran at you."

Pete nodded. "It was just a dumb coincidence that we got in his way. Anyway, Carter was the one I heard coughing. And remember that I felt that the monster that ran at me was not human."

Bob nodded. "Right. Hannibal got away and they headed back to the circus where Stewart was waiting for the loot. But he didn't want to believe there was no loot, so there was a brawl, and Carter ended up in the hospital."

"And after that, Hannibal got more and more nervous because he was missing his drug," Lilly said. "Eventually, he went crazy, broke out of his cage and set out to steal a shiny piece of jewellery so he could finally get his reward."

"So he came here, to the salvage yard. And the thing that he was looking for is this," Pete reached into the neckline of his T-shirt and pulled out the crystal that Madame Yasemin had sold him for his birthday. The cut stone sparkled in the sun.

The Second Investigator couldn't help but laugh. "It is indeed an irony of fate that your fortune-teller, of all people, had something to do with Hannibal's rampage! Perhaps that was the dark shadow she was telling me about. After all, she was the one who was talking about impending doom all the time and sold me a crystal, not knowing that it would lead to this disaster."

"But when I think about it, I could have figured it out much earlier. Hannibal's had it in for me from the beginning. I had just bought the crystal and wore it over my T-shirt, and I walked into the animal tent where Hannibal was sitting in his cage. It was dark, he saw something glittering, wanted it and jumped at me. Also, the next day he ran straight at me when we were at the circus grounds."

"And then there was Aunt Mathilda," Bob said, "who wanted to pet him with a hand full of glittery rings."

“Well, Hannibal ain’t stupid,” Lilly said. “He had realized that Pete possessed something that he wanted to have for himself. And when we passed by here the day before yesterday on our failed publicity tour and he saw both Pete and Jupiter’s aunt’s rings, he knew there was more to come in this place. No wonder he immediately rushed to the salvage yard after he escaped.”

“That night, it was so dark here that we couldn’t really tell Dunnerak and Hannibal apart,” Pete said, shaking his head. “Thank goodness, you two and Pico came in time.”

“And all this time, we thought Pico was behind it,” Bob said. “But all he wanted to do after the blackout was check out the animal tent. And the next night, he actually went out for a drink like Mr Copper said.”

“What’s gonna happen to Hannibal now,” Pete asked. “Do you think you can cure the poor guy of his bad habits?”

“That will be my job from now on,” said Lilly. “I will first put him on drug withdrawal and then make him understand that he doesn’t have to worry about shiny things in the future.”

“And what about the circus?” asked Jupiter.

Lilly sighed. “I don’t know. It’s possible that Copper is going to expel Carter. After all, he only did all this to give the circus a new lease of life on the roller coaster. Still, pumping Hannibal full of drugs was a mess. He may even go to jail for it. Copper has decided to sell the roller coaster to pay Stewart off. He may be a nasty fellow, but he still has a right to his money. Anyway, he will be charged for aggravated assault on Carter.”

“And then Mr Copper has to pay for your smashed up furniture. Who knows, if he’s unlucky, the aggrieved citizens of Rocky Beach might even demand something. It looks like the curtain has to come down for the last time for Trinket Circus!”

“Oh no! It’s not gonna come to that. We’re just going to help you get started with a whole new show!” Bob promised. “If necessary, we’ll step in—as three clowns or something.”

“I’m sure Jupe is good as a clown,” grinned Pete.

“So purely figured. And finally, you still have Dunnerak! Nobody else knows the secret of the monster. So you can still perform the gimmick.”

“How about a combination of the two?” Bob suggested. “The terrible monster chasing Jupe the Clown?”

“Before you two go on planning my future, I have a question,” the First Investigator called out from inside the trailer. “Where do you want to

put these stupid files?" Accusingly, he pointed to the stack of files he had carefully stacked up.

Bob and Pete entered Headquarters and looked helplessly at the mountain of paper. Finally Bob shrugged his shoulders, opened the floor hatch to Tunnel Two and pushed the entire stacks of paper in.

"I think they were doing quite well in there, so we might as well leave them back there."